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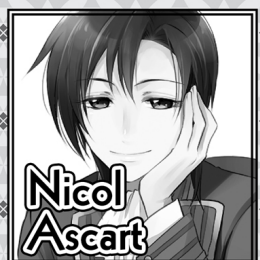
My Next Life as a VILLAINESS: ALL ROUTES LEAD TO DOOM!

FORTUNE·LOVERⅡ

My Next Life as a VILLAINESS

Katarina Claes

The only daughter of Duke Claes. Has a slightly menacing look (in her words: "villainess face"). Regained the memories of her past life and changed from a spoiled noble child into a wild, slightly problematic one. Simple-minded, forgetful, and easily carried away, but honest and loyal. Below average in both academics and magic. Earth Magic user.



Nicol Ascart

Son of Count Ascart, counselor to the King. Beautiful like a doll. Very loving brother. Wind Magic user.

Sora Smith

A young man who can use Fire and Dark Magic. Works at the Magical Ministry, where he uses the surname of Smith. One of the game's love interests, and likes Katarina.

★ Larna Smith

The director of the Magical Tool Laboratory and Katarina's superior. She is talented but weird.

★ Cyrus Lanchester

The serious and strict director of the Magic and Magical Powers Research Department. He is a romanceable character in FL2.

★ Raphael Wolt

A talented boy working at the Ministry. Has a very calm personality.

★ Dewey Percy

A child prodigy who skipped grades to end up working at the Magic Ministry. He is a romanceable character in FL2.

★ Pochi

A Dark Familiar who usually lives inside Katarina's shadow.

★ Luigi Claes

Duke Claes. Has a sweet spot for his daughter Katarina.

★ Millidiana Claes

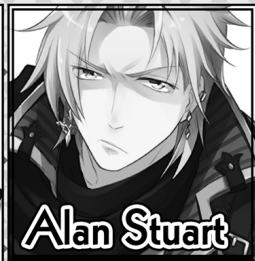
Katarina's mother. Her daughter inherited her villainess-like face.

ALL ROUTES LEAD TO DOOM!

Characters

Keith Claes

Katarina's younger brother, adopted by Duke Claes from a distant branch of the family because of his magic prowess. Sensual and handsome. Earth Magic user.



Alan Stuart

Jeord's younger twin and fourth crown prince. Ruggedly handsome and self-centered. Talented musician. Water Magic user.

Jeord Stuart

Third crown prince. Katarina's fiancée. Has the stereotypical good looks of a blonde, blue-eyed prince, but has a calculating, dark personality. Met Katarina when he had lost interest in everything else. Fire Magic user.

Maria Campbell

A chosen girl who wields Light Magic despite being born a commoner. Hard worker and protagonist of the otome game. A very good baker.

Mary Hunt

Fourth daughter of a marquis and Alan's fiancée. Sweet and beautiful. Known as a paragon of ladylikeness among noble society.

Sophia Ascart

Daughter of Count Ascart, and Nicol's younger sister. Bullied by those around her because of her white hair and red eyes since childhood. Calm and collected.

★ Anne Shelley

Katarina's maid. Has been serving her since she was eight years old.

★ Sarah

A mysterious black-cloaked woman. Has been involved in several Dark Magic-related incidents.

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Chapter 1: A Royal Summons

After coming back from work at the Magical Ministry, I had a hefty dinner and then went to my room to rest on the bed. For no particular reason, I raised my hand and visualized my wand appearing inside it, which it instantly did.

What with being black and having a skull on it, it definitely looked like something a villain would use. As if that wasn't enough, I had the Dark Covenant next to my bed and Pochi, my Dark Familiar, living inside my shadow.

That's a whole villainess starter kit, all right, I thought, sighing to myself.

This all started when I was eight years old. I hit my head while walking around in the castle, which made me recall the memories of my past life as a Japanese high schooler. Before long, I realized that Katarina Claes, the girl I was in this life, was the villainess in *Fortune Lover*, the otome game I'd been playing in my previous one.

Having played *Fortune Lover*, I knew that the character I was now living as was destined to meet doom, in one way or the other, by the end of the game. I did all I could to avoid this, including learning how to farm vegetables and build snake-shaped wooden toys, and, by pure chance, I ended up befriending all of the main characters in the game. My list of friends included the characters that the protagonist could romance, their fiancées, and in some cases even their siblings.

Speaking of the protagonist, that's another person I became friends with. I met her—Maria—during my years at the Academy of Magic, the setting for *Fortune Lover*, which I somehow managed to get through without falling prey to doom.

Oh, how relieved I was! I could spend the rest of my days without worrying about the game's bad ends...or so I thought.

The issue was that, right after graduating, I was supposed to marry Prince Jeord, my fiancé. I was barely getting by as a duke's daughter, and I definitely didn't have it in me to be a princess. In order to delay the marriage for as long as possible, I used my noble-

society connections to get myself a job at the Magical Ministry, saying that I wanted to work for a while before becoming a bride.

That worked, except that there was something very important I didn't know at the time: *Fortune Lover* had a sequel...and it was set in the Magical Ministry! The reason why this was so important was that in *Fortune Lover II*, Katarina Claes—who had been exiled in the canonical ending of the first game—comes back as an antagonist. This time, depending on the ending, she has the choice of either being killed or rotting in prison for the rest of her life. Either way, she's doomed.

And to think I was so relieved about having gotten past the first game! Now I had to come up with a plan to survive the second. All my efforts, however, seemed to be useless. I was looking more like the Katarina in the game every day: I had the Dark Familiar, the Dark Covenant, and as of late, even the Dark Wand (skull included)!

All I could do was sigh.

I wish I at least could change this wand into something cuter, like a star-shaped one or something.

I had tried doing that, but to no avail. Maybe it was because I couldn't change its shape after deciding on it the first time, or maybe it was because I was just destined to be a villainess.

And if all these dark items weren't enough, I was also taking Dark Magic lessons at the Ministry. Not that I wanted to, of course... My superiors had ordered me to so that I could demonstrate for them the content of the Dark Covenant. The only way to show a spell contained in that book was to actually perform it, since no one else could read the covenant and it magically prevented me from speaking or writing about its contents.

So, since I couldn't really use any Dark Magic, I was told to practice under Raphael, who was very good at teaching. I was worried that this would bring me closer to becoming the villainess Katarina as portrayed in the game, but on the other hand, I didn't want to waste all the efforts I'd made to decipher the covenant.

I also figured that maybe I could learn some kind of escape spell to help me run away and out of the country as a last resort in case doom caught up with me. Running away without putting up a fight wasn't very in-character for an antagonist, but what could I do? My priority was still surviving.

What made surviving so difficult was that, unlike with *FL1*, I had never played *FL2*. I didn't know when it was supposed to end or

what kind of events its story involved. My only hints were some dreams I had (I didn't know how or why) that showed me my past-life friend Acchan playing the game, and a mysterious note I found which contained some information about *FL2*. The note, which I happened to find inside of a book, was written in Japanese.

I needed to learn more about the game, but I couldn't have those dreams on command and I never found any additional notes after the first one.

For the time being, I had to focus on my Dark Magic lessons. Since one of the bad ends seemed to involve me ending up in prison, I also had to think of a way to escape from there just in case.

Maybe Sora knows how to break out of prison. He knows lots of stuff. I'll have to ask him.

All this doom-avoiding stuff kept me busy enough, but then, a few days ago, something else happened to further complicate my life. Something I didn't really want to think about...

"The duke has summoned you, Miss," one of the servants said from outside of the room, surprising me. Mother used to summon me at the drop of a hat, but it was rare for father to do so. I went to his quarters, scared that I'd done something terrible without remembering it.

"It's me, Katarina. I take it that you want to see me?" I asked while knocking on his door.

"Oh, come in, my dear," he briskly replied. From the tone of his response, I could tell that he wasn't mad at me—which, to be honest, he almost never was—but I kept my guard up in case he still actually wanted to scold me about something.

"How can I help you?" I asked, looking at my father sitting at his desk and going over some papers.

The usual expression of delight that was on his face whenever he saw me suddenly gave way to a much more serious one.

I knew it! I'm gonna get scolded.

"It's about you and Prince Jeord," he began.

"The prince?"

The only problematic thing that happened involving Jeord lately was that he came with me to the orphanage, so I thought that this was about that.

"You two have been engaged for nearly ten years now. Since

you have already graduated from the academy, many of our relatives insist that it is high time that you be wed to the prince."

"W-Wed?!" I parroted back at him, surprised.

I knew that marrying right after graduation was the norm for many nobles, but neither my friends nor Jeord's older brothers were married, so I had assumed that I'd still have a lot of time before having to deal with that issue.

"But the prince's older brothers are still only engaged, is that not so?" I asked, and father nodded at me.

"Exactly. And that is precisely why being the first to be officially married would give Jeord a great advantage in becoming the next king."

That makes sense. It's probably easier to become king if you aren't single.

"But," I objected, "as mother is always saying, I am unfit to be a princess, let alone a queen, and I am inclined to agree with her."

Being a duke's daughter was already difficult, and if I somehow managed to barely scrape by, it was all thanks to the help of my brother Keith. How could I ever make it as an even *nobler* noble?

"I believe that you are fit to be a princess and indeed even a queen, Katarina," father replied, looking me straight in the eye.

"Are you sure?!" I asked, convinced that his unconditional love for his daughter must be compromising his judgment.

He chuckled as if he knew exactly what I was thinking, and responded, "I know very well how much you struggle with etiquette and that you are not the most elegant of ladies. That being said, your mishaps are never catastrophic, and you are very good with people. You are good at understanding them and you are liked by many. If you put your heart to it, you could become a wonderful queen."

I still thought that he was biased, but the way he looked at me made me believe that maybe he wasn't wrong after all.

"So, do you also believe that I should marry as soon as possible?" I asked him.

So far, since he had never pressured me into marriage, I had assumed that this wasn't a problem for him.

"Not really. I feel no need to strengthen our family's connection with the king's, so I believe that the choice should be yours."

"R-Really? But then why did you bring this up in the first place?"

“I wanted you to know that many of our relatives are talking about these things, and so they may try to discuss them with you when you meet during balls and other such gatherings.”

“Oh...” I sighed, relieved. The situation wasn’t as bad as I thought it would be.

What surprised me though was how father said that he didn’t need to strengthen our family’s connection with the king. He never acted like an especially ambitious man, but hearing it outright like that was still surprising.

“However, I remember how happy you were when my engagement with the prince was decided. Was that not because of how much it would strengthen our bonds with the royal family?”

“Hahaha! You both ask me the same questions.”

“Huh?”

“No, it’s nothing. The reason I was so happy is that you, back then, were very fond of the prince. What father doesn’t rejoice for his daughter’s happiness?”

“Father...”

He really only thinks of his daughter... I wonder what will happen to this family...

“But I can see that right now you don’t want to marry the prince, which is why I said that I leave the choice to you.”

Back when I was a kid, I’d fallen in love at first sight with Jeord...but things were different now, and father had noticed.

“I want you to marry someone you truly love, Katarina, like I did with Millidiana.”

“Like you and mother...?”

During my childhood, my parents had been acting coldly toward each other because of a mutual misunderstanding. However, after the memories of my past life came back, the misunderstanding was cleared up and they started being *so* affectionate that it made things awkward for their children.

“Yes. Of course, if possible, I wish for you and your husband to avoid going through any stupid misunderstandings, like we did, and to communicate with each other effectively to live a happy married life.”

It was easy to tell from his words how harsh that misunderstanding had been. I was very glad that the issue had been resolved.

“Now you see why I want you to take your time and think

about your own feelings so you can avoid issues like those. But since you have been taking more time than I expected, I just want to offer you some advice."

So that's why he never insisted I marry early. Father was thinking about what's best for me... Thanks, father.

"I want you to marry someone you love. But you are an adult now, and so are the people around you. If it takes you too long to realize that you love someone, that someone may already be married to another person by the time you have made up your mind. Should that happen, you would not be able to do anything about it anymore. Take the prince, for example. Suppose that, after a long period of introspection, you realize that you are indeed in love with him. But if that time of reflection comes at the cost of postponing your marriage again and again, the engagement may be canceled and he may find another fiancée. He is royalty, after all."

"Yes..."

"I believe in your ability to judge people, Katarina. When you come to me with someone, telling me that you want to marry that person, I will not object—whomever that is. You will always have my blessing. Now, I know that work at the Ministry is keeping you busy, but just remember that those you have feelings for may not wait around for you."

The facts he had laid out hit me pretty hard, and I still couldn't think clearly when I left his room.

I have to find someone I love and tell them before I lose them... I didn't want to think about that. Just thinking about loving someone, for some reason, gave me the chills. I knew how important that was, but I really couldn't bring myself to think about that whole issue.

I'll do it someday...

I'd let myself keep so busy with work that a convenient *someday* had never come, and now father had to tell me these things because I still hadn't given them proper thought. I imagined he was very disappointed about this. I had to think about my feelings, but also about surviving the game's bad ends... *Too much stuff.*

So much stuff that it made me sleepy. Next thing I knew, it was morning and I was just waking up. Of course, I hadn't managed to think about either of the two issues at hand. Now even I was disappointed in myself.

My wand, by the way, had disappeared back into its darkness-realm home. It looked scary, but maybe deep down it was a good...boy?

Since I had work on that day, Anne got me out of bed by stripping away all the covers as usual.

"It is morning, Miss. Please wake up."

"Urgh..." I replied, still half-asleep.

She helped me get ready to leave, then I ate breakfast and rode on the carriage, where I slept once again on the way to the Ministry. After reaching my workplace and being forcefully awakened, I walked to my department's office.

"Good morning," I announced, opening the door to the Magical Tool Laboratory. Sora was already there, along with Raphael, our department's vice-director and the busiest person in the department —if not in the whole Ministry!

It was normal for Sora to be there early, as he had joined the department's ranks at the same time as me, and we newcomers were supposed to clean the office before work started, but that didn't explain why Raphael was already there too.

I looked at him, confused, and he explained that, "I had to come in early because there's so much that I still need to do."

"If you are busy, I could train by myself today," I proposed, seeing how tired he looked.

I had been training under his supervision almost every day, as ordered by the higher-ups, but this was obviously taking a toll on him. I didn't want him to overwork himself because of me.

"Don't worry about that. Actually, I came in early so that I could finish before starting your lessons, so there really is no problem at all," he replied. His tone was much more relaxed than the one he used when our superiors were around, but his words still left no room for objection.

While Raphael kept running his pen across documents at his desk, I started helping Sora out with cleaning. The office was cluttered, containing an assortment of random items including anything from dumbbells to cosmetics, but it wasn't exactly dirty, so some reorganizing and cleaning were enough to put it into a presentable shape.

While sweeping the floor with a broom, I recalled the thought I'd had on the previous day, and I approached Sora with a question. "Say, Sora, would you know how to escape from a locked prison

cell?"

"Huh? What's this all of a sudden?" he asked back, clearly suspicious.

"It's just that, er, you never know when that might come in handy, right?" That was the best that I could come up with on the fly. Judging by the tired look Sora gave me, my best hadn't been very good.

"When's breaking out of prison going to come in handy for a noble lady like yourself?"

When they put me in there for being a villainess in the game's story! I wanted to say, but obviously I couldn't... So I tried to come up with a better excuse. *Yeah, when could it come in handy? Oh, right!*

"Like, remember when I got caught during our last mission? I want to learn how to escape if something like that ever happens again," I explained.

I was sure I'd come up with the perfect excuse, but Sora looked kind of troubled.

"That, yeah... That was all my fault. I'm sorry."

"What? It wasn't your fault at all! I got into all that trouble myself!"

It was I who had decided to run after Sora, ended up getting captured, and caused him to get captured as well. Surely, anybody would agree that it was my responsibility, but Sora shook his head.

"I shouldn't have lost my cool back then. Don't worry, I'll make sure nothing like that ever happens to you again," he promised.

I was grateful for those kind words of course...but I really wanted to know how to escape from a prison cell.

"Thank you, but, see...if you could tell me how to actually break out..."

"I told you you don't need to worry," he replied, confused by my insistence.

This won't get me anywhere... I thought, but all of a sudden Raphael unexpectedly joined our conversation, looking at us as if we were completely hopeless.

"I think that Lady Katarina just wants to learn how to open locked doors, Sora."

"Huh? But wouldn't it be easier just not to get caught again in the first place?"

"That seems to be unrelated to her concerns. Maybe she read about lockpicking in a book and got interested in it. You know how

curious she can be," he replied wryly.

"Really...?" Sora asked me.

"Yes! I read about it in a book!" I affirmed, grateful for Raphael's help.

"I guess you have always been curious after all..." Sora murmured as the look of doubt dissipated from his face.

"So, do you know anything about lockpicking?" I asked again.

"If it's a simple lock, you can usually pick it with a bent piece of metal, but there are all kinds of locks out there. For the most complicated ones, your best bet would be getting a mold of the actual key," he explained, raising his hand to his chin as if he was trying to remember. He was probably speaking from experience based on some old job of his.

Unfortunately, I guessed that the prisons in Sorcié didn't settle for the simple kind of locks.

"And how would you go about getting a mold?"

"You need clay or something like that to take the shape of the key, and then you make a metal copy with the mold. That's easier said than done though."

Also, wouldn't it be too late to do that once I'm already in prison?

"I see... Isn't there a faster way? You know, something so easy that anyone could do it?"

"Of course not! What good would locks be if *anyone* could *easily* open them?" he replied incredulously.

He...has a point, I conceded, now sad that my plan wouldn't work, when Raphael spoke again.

"If the problem is taking a mold of a key, maybe you could do that with Dark Magic."

"Really?!" I asked, moving closer to Raphael's desk, which seemed to amuse him.

"You can control darkness, and we know that you can materialize it as physical matter. I don't know for certain, but it's a possibility."

"I want to try it! Please teach me!"

"We'll look into that during today's lesson then," he assented.

"Yes! Thank you!" I replied with a smile.

"Listen," Raphael then whispered to me, "I helped you out because you seemed very concerned about this lockpicking thing, but *please* don't do anything dangerous. If you need help with anything, just ask me."

His words sounded so final that I couldn't tell him no, even if I wanted to. He was so smart that he had probably realized I was up to something.

"I will," I assured him.

"It's a promise, all right? If you don't keep it, I'll have to punish you," he continued, smiling in an unusually creepy way.

I often forgot it, but Raphael, kind as he was, knew how to be tough too. That being said, I could tell that he was genuinely worried for me, so I knew that I had to keep my end of the bargain.

After a while, our other colleagues came into the office and started working, and Raphael and I walked into the room where we always had my Dark Magic lessons.

"We have already been over this, but it bears repeating: Dark Magic controls darkness," he said, ready to teach me about lockpicking as soon as we were in the room.

"Yes," I replied.

"The spell you are already practicing, the one that lets you summon a sphere of darkness, is a simple form of that. However, as with other types of magic, this spell doesn't necessarily have to be a sphere. You can shape it however you want."

Like he told me, I knew that Earth, Fire, and Water Magic spells could take on different shapes too. Not *my* spells though, since I wasn't good enough.

"And you managed to materialize something out of darkness, didn't you?" he asked.

"Yes, the skull wand."

"Exactly, the, er, skull wand. This is why I think that you may be able to materialize other objects too. If you were able to shape darkness so as to fit a lock and then materialize it, you would have yourself a key. Let's practice that."

"Yes!"

I couldn't shake off the feeling that he was tricking me into being interested in the lessons, but I couldn't help agreeing anyway. To be completely honest, I was actually starting to get bored practicing the same old spell. My darkness sphere had grown from the size of a pea to that of, say, a tangerine, but it wasn't getting any better than that. Maybe Raphael had realized that I needed something new and refreshing to stay motivated. He could always read people like that.

"Now, try producing some darkness."

“Okay.” I materialized my skull wand and made a tangerine-sized black glob appear in front of me. This was the point where normally I would try to make the darkness larger, but today I was to try to change its shape instead.

Become a key! Become a key! I shouted in my mind, and the sphere suddenly got squished into a key shape. Sort of. *First try! Yay! Go me!*

“That’s amazing! You managed to do it on your first try!”

“Hehehe!” I was more than happy to hear Raphael’s compliments.

Maybe I do *have some talent. Check me out, I’m gonna become the best Wielder of Darkness there ever was!*

Just as I was thinking of an even better key shape, someone knocked on the door. Raphael looked me in the eye, and I understood what he wanted me to do, so I made the wand and the key disappear back into darkness. These lessons, as with most things that concerned Dark Magic, were to be kept secret.

However, when we heard the voice of the person who had knocked, we realized that there had been no need for secrecy to begin with. “It’s me, Larna!”

It was our magic-loving, work-avoiding, very talented but slightly problematic department director. She was very curious about my progress with Dark Magic, but since Raphael, the most hard-working person in the department, was busy with me, she had to make up for that by actually doing her job. She had been so busy, in fact, that this was the first time she had managed to walk in on us before the lesson ended, and I had to wonder whether she was here because of a problem of some kind.

“Please come in,” Raphael said, and a very gloomy-looking Larna walked in. My guess about there being a problem seemed to have been right.

“Is anything the matter?” he asked her.

“It’s a summons,” she replied.

“From...your superiors?” he guessed. Larna often skipped out on her work to pursue her personal magic interests, which would explain being summoned by her superiors.

“No. From the castle. From His Majesty, to be exact.”

Raphael and I exchanged a worried look. *Just what has she done?!*

“Did you get into trouble?” Raphael had naturally also assumed

that she had been up to no good.

"Me? No. The summons isn't for me. It's for Lady Katarina here."

"M-Me?!"

Why would the king summon me?! What did I do?!

"It's about the Dark Covenant," Larna continued. "Maria was also called, and you're supposed to bring the books with you when you go to the castle."

"Oh... So it's about that," I muttered, relieved that I wasn't in trouble.

After coming into possession of the Dark Covenant by sheer coincidence, I was told to decipher it, because its contents were apparently very important. Maria was also deciphering a book, except hers was the *Light* Covenant.

"Why do you look so distressed then?" I asked Larna. After all, she wasn't the one being summoned and we also knew the reason why the king had reached out.

"Research on Dark Magic is strictly regulated, and we have to report to the royal family about everything we do concerning it," she explained. "So far, they haven't really seemed to care about our experiments, but if they want you to go to the castle, that could mean that they want us to stop researching Dark Magic altogether! They could tell us to stop, now that we're this close to uncovering new kinds of magic never seen before!"

Oh, so it's all just about her personal interest in it. This doesn't concern me one bit, I thought, but what she had just said was probably true. The royal family were supposed to be the only ones who knew about Dark Magic, but we had found other people who could use it, such as Raphael and that mysterious woman, Sarah.

Maybe they'll take the covenant from me and I won't have to work on deciphering it anymore! That'd be good... But I still want to learn spells to blind my opponents during a getaway, or to create a key to escape from prison, and since Pochi is a Dark Familiar, they would probably also forbid me from letting him out of my shadow. How can I deal with this?

Larna, still looking gloomy, informed me that I was supposed to go to the castle on that very day in the afternoon, so I didn't even have time to think about it, and I felt nervous about how sudden this all was. I was also supposed to keep the summons a secret, probably because this all involved Dark Magic.

Thankfully this wasn't a particularly busy day at the department, so I could just say that I had to go because Prince Jeord had invited me to the castle. My lesson with Raphael was therefore cut short and, alongside Maria, I prepared to leave the Ministry.

Raphael noticed how worried I looked, and he saw me off with a kind smile that seemed to tell me that everything would be fine.

As I rode the carriage that was taking me to the castle, my anxiousness, thanks to Raphael's smile, subsided, but then I started getting nervous for a different reason. After all, it would be my first time properly speaking with the king. We had greeted each other during balls and the like, but all I had been doing then was mostly standing by Jeord's side and smiling.

I didn't know much about the kings of other countries, but I'd heard that ours was always busy. The queen was apparently also just as involved in diplomacy, as were their four sons, but even with all this help the king still had so much work to do that getting to see him was extremely difficult. How could I not get nervous being summoned by someone like that, even if it wasn't a public audience?

I sighed and looked in front of me, where Maria was sitting with a dreadful look on her face. "Are you okay, Maria?"

"I am rather nervous about meeting His Majesty..." Her voice was down to a whisper.

I realized something that should have been obvious right from the start: if a noble lady like me was nervous about meeting the king, whose son I was even engaged to, a commoner like Maria was probably just as nervous—scratch that, she probably was much more nervous.

Maria wielded the rare Light Magic, she worked in the most prestigious department of the Magical Ministry, and in general was extremely talented...but she still was a girl my age, and she experienced fear and anxiety just as I did.

I took her hands into mine. They were cold and shaking.

"I know, right? Me too," I told her, and she looked at me, surprised.

"You are nervous too?"

"Yes, of course. We've been summoned by the most important person in the whole kingdom after all," I continued, deliberately exaggerating the gravity of the situation, and Maria's face showed

the hint of a smile.

"I guess that is true." She giggled. Her hands had stopped shaking, and I could feel that some warmth had flowed back into them. This, in turn, made me feel less worried about the whole thing.

The carriage kept moving, and by the point that I'd started saying things like, "Just imagine His Majesty as a potato. Imagine speaking to a big potato," which was...possibly treason, we reached the castle.

I thought that Jeord would be there waiting for us, since he was my cover for leaving the Ministry early, but I couldn't see the prince anywhere. Instead we were met by a servant who showed us into a drawing room, where we were told to wait. It was an average, not particularly big room—any noble could actually ask to use it, as long as they had been granted access to the castle.

I expected that we would be called for when the king was ready to receive us, but I suddenly realized I had an urgent problem to attend to: I needed to go to the toilet. In hindsight, eating a very hefty lunch to pump me up for the summons hadn't been the best idea. I informed Maria of my predicament and sprinted out of the drawing room. I knew where the closest toilet was, so I reached it in time, without any accidents.

I was ready to go back to the drawing room when... Suddenly, Pochi jumped out of my shadow and started running. I ran after him, leaving the building I was in and reaching a place I'd already been to before—the entrance to the forbidden area where, as far as I knew, Jeord's uncle had shut himself in after the dispute for the throne.

For some reason, this was the third time that Pochi had led me to this place. Maybe he liked it because it was always dark, even during the day. This time he had brought me even closer to the building where the king's brother allegedly lived. Since access to the whole area was forbidden, I started getting worried.

"Come on, Pochi, get back into my shadow!" I ordered. He gave me a displeased look, but the serious face I was making eventually convinced him to obey.

Just as I started heading back to where I was actually supposed to be, a window right next to me opened with a click. Inside, a young man with golden hair and black eyes was standing by himself. Being surrounded by handsome friends all my life had

granted me a certain immunity to attractive people, but this particular young man was so impressive in his beauty that I couldn't help but stare at him. I stared for so long, in fact, that he noticed me.

His black eyes looked into mine, and he furrowed his brow.

"Why are you here?" he asked in a terribly cold voice. Between that and the intensity of his stare, I felt a chill run down my spine. He was probably mad because I had stepped inside a forbidden area.

"S-Sorry, I got lost and ended up here. I'll leave immediately!" I obviously couldn't tell him about Pochi.

"Yes, please do that and leave my sight already, Katarina Claes, you villainess," he replied.

I was so shocked I couldn't move even a step. "You know about me? And what do you mean 'villainess'?"

This was probably the shut-in prince I had heard about, but why would he know about me, and more importantly, why would he call me a villainess?

"You're quite famous," he smirked, "for being a villainess who plays with the hearts of princes."

"I'm not playing with anybody's heart!" I could get behind it when people told me that I wasn't a good fit for Jeord, but I certainly wasn't playing with his heart.

"You continuously ignore his romantic advances, hurt him by doing so, and you don't even realize it? You truly are despicable," he laughed.

"B-But I..."

I didn't know how to respond. Truth to be told, I still hadn't given an answer to Jeord's confession of love. Even father had told me to think about that.

"Now leave! At once!" the young man demanded, slamming the window shut.

I hadn't even managed to learn this person's name, but I clearly understood that he hated me. I was shocked by what he'd told me, but I had the summons to think about, so I tried to forget about it and hurried back to the drawing room.

"I got lost on my way to the toilet," I explained to a worried Maria, laughing to diffuse any suspicion.

I felt that I shouldn't talk about meeting that man, and I shoved the thought of him into the back of my mind so that I could think

about it later.

After a while, someone knocked on the door. I expected it'd be a servant, telling us that the king was ready to see us. When my expectations were proved wrong, and I saw who was actually walking into the room, I immediately bowed down my head as deep as I could. Maria, seeing what I was doing, did the same. My etiquette training had finally come in handy.

"Raise your heads," he said, and we nervously complied.

The silver-haired man standing in front of us, whose mere presence in the room was enough to be imposing, looked very similar to Jeord, and he even had the same blue eyes. This was natural, since he was Jeord's father: Orwen Stuart, King of Sorcié.

I couldn't imagine that the king himself would come to see us—and in this unassuming drawing room, no less—instead of us having to go to him.

He started speaking in a low, calm voice. "Thank you for coming all the way here. I have wanted to speak with you for quite a while, and today a sudden change in plans gave me the time to do so. Please excuse the sudden nature of it all."

"Not at all, Your Majesty. It is an honor," I replied with a curtsy.

His eyes widened slightly as he replied.

"I privately summoned you as Orwen Stuart, not as the king. There is no need for such formalities. Feel free to speak to me as you would to my sons."

This explained why he wasn't seeing us in the throne room. If he'd been talking to us in his capacity as king, he wouldn't have been here with just a few servants by his side.

However, even if he said that we didn't need to be formal, I couldn't be as casual with a king as I was with Jeord and Alan. This also made me think that maybe I was a bit too casual with those two as well. We'd been friends for so long that I'd almost forgotten that they were still princes.

The king then told us to sit down, and, after we did, he sat down himself.

"Now, let us start. I would like to see your covenants."

I looked at the servants in the room. The covenants were supposed to be secret to all but a handful of people, so I was surprised that he would talk about them in front of this audience.

Realizing my concern, he spoke again. "Worry not. These are all

trusted individuals who are very close to me. They already know about the covenants and about Dark Magic."

The servants gave a small nod of agreement, and, knowing that I didn't have to worry about keeping secrets anymore, I opened my bag to take out the Dark Covenant, which I put on the table in front of me. Maria did the same with her Light Covenant.

"So this is what they look like," the king said, first taking the Light Covenant into his hands, looking at it from all angles and then opening it and flipping through its pages.

The covenants were enchanted in such a way that only their owner could read them, and other people could only see a bunch of blank pages. The king didn't seem in the least surprised about this—he probably already knew about it. After flipping through the whole book, he put it back on the table and started looking at the Dark Covenant instead. I was positive that he was being more careful about how we took it in his hands than he had been with the Light one.

I guess something called the "Dark Covenant" is self-evidently scary...

He flipped through this book too, and then put it back on the table.

"Just as I was told, I cannot see anything on the covenants' pages." This confirmed that he already knew about how they worked.

He then asked me and Maria several questions about how we had found the covenants, how far we were in deciphering them, and so on.

"Very well. That is enough about the covenants," he declared after we had given him enough answers.

I was surprised—let down, almost—by how little time we had spent discussing the books.

"Now we shall discuss the reason why I summoned you two here."

What? Weren't the covenants the reason?! Did he really want to scold me for something I did?! I thought, worried, but what the king said next surprised me even more.

"We need to talk about Dark Magic."

Dark Magic...?

"You have both had your share of trouble because of Dark Magic. Especially you, I understand." He looked right at me as he

spoke.

He was technically right, but that was probably just because I was the game's villainess.

"Knowledge of this forbidden magic was supposed to be an exclusive prerogative of the royal family, but this is no longer the case. It is best that you two know why this is," he continued with a distressed look on his face.

Indeed, all we knew right now was that the family of Marquis Dieke had gotten their hands on Dark Magic, which then spread to other people including that Sarah woman.

"I assume that you already know about how my predecessor suddenly died before settling on an heir, and how this led to severe infighting among the royal family," the king slowly started explaining.

"Yes," I replied. I'd known about that for a while, and I'd even heard from Jeord that some people had died and others had been exiled in the fight for the crown. However, hearing it straight from the current king made it all the more shocking.

"You may also know that some lost their lives during this time. That was the result of murders within the royal family," he continued without batting an eye despite the terrifying things he was saying. "Of course, the secret of these heinous killings was mostly kept within the castle walls. One of the killers poisoned his stepbrother, laughing at the sight of his painful death. Another threw his stepbrother off a tower, pretending it was an accident. Those were days of blood and madness. Men, overtaken by murderous rage, killed the brothers they once loved."

The fight for the crown makes people kill each other? It's way worse than I thought...

"Amid that chaos, it is now impossible to say who first resorted to the use of Dark Magic to gain an advantage. What we know is that the secret leaked to other nobles, eventually reaching the Dieke family." He then stood up from his seat. "The responsibility lies with us, the royal family. It was our foolishness that let Dark Magic spread. I apologize for all the trouble that this has caused you," he said, lowering his head toward us.

I was too shocked by all that was going on to even move at all, but Maria immediately stood up and started talking.

"You deserve no blame and owe no apology, Your Majesty," she stated.

His Majesty, hearing this, looked at Maria, and a faint smile appeared on his face.

Personally, I also agreed with Maria. If anything, we should have thanked the king for having stopped that whole fight.

"Still, as I was born in this royal family, it is my duty to offer you this apology, and I beg you to accept it."

The thought of a responsibility given to you by birth really resonated with me. As a noble lady, I'd had to hear a lot about that.

"I understand," I responded, standing up, "and we accept your apology. Please raise your head now, Your Majesty."

Maria also nodded, and the king raised his head and sat down again.

"Thank you. My wish is to capture those who wield Dark Magic, so that we may prevent the abuse of this dreadful tool. Will you lend me your help when I need it?"

Being the king, he could have just ordered us to lend him our help, and we would have obliged. But instead, he had asked us—I appreciated that.

"Of course. Whatever I may be able to help with," I replied, looking him in the eye.

"Thank you." For the first time, his face didn't show any concern. He was simply smiling.

So, the reason he had summoned us was actually to apologize and ask for our help. Once he had done those two things, he quickly left, taking his servants with him. He really was as busy as they said.

"That was something, huh?" I told Maria as soon as we were alone.

"Most definitely, yes," she agreed. We then looked at each other and shared a tired laugh.

Unfortunately, I couldn't talk to anyone else about it, but my meeting with the king had been very surprising. He was a very easy person to talk to, and all my nervousness had proven unnecessary.

Suddenly, we heard another knock on the door. We thought that a servant had come to inform us that our carriage was ready to leave, but we were in for another surprise.

"Jeord and Alan!" I cried, seeing the familiar faces at the door. I had thought we wouldn't be able to see the two princes today.

"Thank you for coming to the castle," Jeord greeted us. His smile didn't look as confident as usual—it almost looked painful.

Alan also looked as if he was in pain...

Do they have a stomachache? I asked myself, but my question was quickly answered when Jeord's smile disappeared entirely, replaced by a serious stare.

"We heard that the king wanted to talk to you about the details of the succession fight today."

So they know about all that happened too... And their father told them about what we were going to discuss today.

"We really want to apologize too as members of the royal family. You have gone through so much trouble because of Dark Magic." Jeord bowed low.

"We're sorry," Alan added, bowing as well.

I couldn't believe that they would apologize about something that happened so long ago that they couldn't even remember it themselves. That, too, must have been the responsibility they had to shoulder as royals.

There's only one thing I can say then...

"I accept your apology."

"I do too," Maria agreed.

"Thank you," the princes responded in unison. They looked like proper members of the royal family, but in a different way than they usually did.

"So, what did you make of it?" Jeord asked, once again looking very concerned.

I wasn't sure of what he meant, but thankfully Alan followed up with an explanation.

"You heard the story from our father. It was dreadful, right? So, do you look down on us now, too?" he asked. He looked to be genuinely in pain as he spoke.

Oh, that's why they looked so concerned... They're worried that we'll think less of them because of what their relatives did. I remember being asked the same thing after hearing about their granddad, the previous king...but my answer stays the same.

"Just as I said when I heard about your grandfather, you weren't the ones to do those heinous things. I know both of you well, and my opinion of you won't change just because of what I heard today," I answered while looking straight at them.

The people I heard about today were some old royals I don't even know. The two people in front of me are my friends that I've known for a long time. I'd never even try to compare them.

"I agree with Lady Katarina. The facts we learned today will not change the way we think of you," Maria joined in.

Jeord and Alan looked extremely relieved.

"Thank you, both of you." Jeord spoke with a real, genuine smile.

"Thanks..." Alan followed somewhat shyly.

Now they both looked like my friends again.

They had also come there to tell us that our carriage was indeed ready, and they walked us all the way there. Jeord escorted me, and his brother escorted Maria.

I looked at Alan, walking in front of me and Jeord, and wondered how things were going between him and Mary. According to the game's plot, if he was chosen as the character to pursue, he was supposed to fall in love with Maria while at the

academy, but that never happened. If he wasn't, he ended up happily married to Mary...but those two didn't seem to be particularly in love with each other.

Maybe he'll fall in love with Maria during the events of FL2...

"Katarina," Jeord asked me out of the blue, "did you not forget your bag in the drawing room?"

Much to my dismay and surprise, he was right. I had forgotten my very important bag which contained the very important Dark Covenant.

"It would seem so..." I replied sadly, and Alan gave me a look that felt like a thousand exasperated sighs compressed together.

I was released from all that tension and I just kind of...forgot...

"Let's go to retrieve it then. Wait for us at the carriage, Alan, Maria," Jeord said, and we went back to the drawing room.

I said that I would go by myself, since forgetting the bag was entirely my fault, but Jeord insisted on escorting me and walked alongside me all the way back there with a smile. Thankfully, my bag was still where I'd left it, and the Dark Covenant was still inside it.

"It's here! Thank you for coming with me," I spoke, relieved.

"Oh, don't mention it. It was on purpose, after all," he replied.

Huh? On purpose...?

The smile on Jeord's face now seemed to hide some deeper meaning.

"I had noticed that you had forgotten your bag, but I said nothing so that I could spend a little time alone with you," he explained.

Whoa! What a mastermind! I thought, with my jaw literally open from the surprise.

"And also," he continued with a giggle, "thank you for your words earlier. I expected that you would be understanding even after hearing those dreadful tales, but the way you spoke made me truly happy."

He looked happy too—just a normal smile with no dark undertones.

Oh, so he just wanted to thank me for that?

"I'm afraid I fell in even deeper love with you," he added before swiftly moving dangerously close to me and grasping my hips.

"Gah?!" was the only sound I managed to make. Jeord didn't seem to be bothered by it, and kept on staring at me with his

sparkly, princely smile.

"You are the best fiancée a man could wish for. I want to marry you as soon as possible."

I could feel my face getting warmer and warmer...and then I remembered what my father had told me not long ago.

I have to think about my own feelings... But...

"Prince Jeord, I... Well..." I started speaking, grasping for words.

"Are you scared?"

"What?" I asked back, confused. The aforementioned sparkly smile had disappeared from Jeord's face, and now he looked somewhat melancholic.

"When I approach you like this, does it scare you? The way you draw back from me... It took me a while to realize, but is it fear that moves you so? It is, isn't it?"

I didn't know what to say. Fear... That word made something move deep inside my heart.

Seeing my reaction—or rather, lack thereof, Jeord spoke again.

"It seems that I was right. I was scaring you... I'm sorry for not realizing this sooner." He looked like he was on the verge of tears.

The words of the young man I'd met earlier that day echoed through my head. I was hurting Jeord. I needed to do something. I mustered up my courage and tried to explain what I'd kept hidden inside my heart for so long.

"No, I'm not scared. Well, I am...but *not* of you. I'm...scared of falling in love."

It was the first time I'd ever revealed this to anyone, and Jeord looked shocked by the revelation.

No wonder he's shocked. It probably doesn't make sense to him, but it's the truth.

When I realized that I had reincarnated into Katarina Claes, I also knew that the reason behind her doom was love. She fell in love with Jeord, and the jealousy of seeing him love another girl—the protagonist, that is—led her to catastrophic results.

I knew that Katarina Claes couldn't fall in love. I knew that *I* couldn't fall in love. If I did, I risked going mad because of it, and that would be the end for me. Even before I understood these feelings, they were subconsciously keeping me from loving anyway. I could help others find love, but I couldn't do the same thing myself. I wasn't allowed to.

Despite all this, however, Jeord had confessed his love to me. I'd had feelings for him since before regaining the memories of my past life, but the fear of doom kept me from reciprocating. That was why I had tried to forget about Jeord's confession, eventually succeeding.

I was scared of falling in love, and, as a result, I ended up hurting Jeord. It was just as that man had told me: I was despicable. I had run away for long enough, and now it was time to be honest with Jeord. Seeing him so saddened was what gave me the resolve to speak from the heart.

"I have always worried that I would be doomed if I ever fell in love," I admitted. Jeord looked surprised, but he let me go on. "I still am. That is why I kept dodging your feelings. I'm really sorry."

Of course, I couldn't talk about *Fortune Lover*, but my abstract explanation seemed to be good enough for Jeord.

"Thank you for being open with me. I am very relieved to know that you were not simply scared of me," he told me with a smile. "However, I wish there was a way to relieve you of this fear. Having you scared of romance would make things quite difficult."

He was right. Despite all that happened, even despite all that my father had told me, I ended up giving in to fear. The thought that love would destroy me took precedence over everything else. But now that Jeord had helped me realize why I couldn't keep being so weak, I thought that I wanted to change.

"I've kept my eyes shut because of fear all this time, but I won't do so anymore. I want to take my feelings in my own hands...and yours too."

Jeord's face as he listened to me was now so happy that I suddenly felt embarrassed. Even if I could have worked a bit more on the delivery, at least I'd finally thought and spoken about my feelings, like father had encouraged me to do.

That being said, there was still a problem. Doom was still there, waiting for me, and it was closer than ever. Being honest about my feelings would do me no good if I were dead, and I was the type of person who could only concentrate on one thing at a time.

"I-I'm sorry if this sounds like I'm taking back what I just said, but I can't accept your feelings *right now*. I'm currently struggling with an urgent problem, you see, and until I'm done with that I don't really have, you know...the mental capacity..."

I felt a bit bad about letting Jeord down while he looked so

happy, but he just grinned, unsurprised.

"You have looked very concerned since you started working at the Magical Ministry. Don't worry. I will wait. I have waited long enough that a little more time will hardly make a difference. But if you ever need some support, please do rely on me," he declared, much to my relief.

I was also honestly surprised that he'd noticed how concerned I'd been since starting my job at the Ministry. He'd even noticed how frightened I was, even though he had guessed the wrong reason for it. Jeord was always looking out for me, and he always noticed when something was wrong.

We had known each other since I was eight years old, and he was always there when I needed him. I didn't understand my feelings completely yet, and I was still fearful and bewildered. But I knew that Jeord was very important to me. As embarrassing as it was, I wanted to tell him about how I really felt. Once again, I gathered my courage and started speaking.

"Love still leaves me confused, and a bit scared, but when you said that you loved me, that made me very, very happy. I could only be happy hearing something like that coming from a person as wonderful as you are."

Jeord was a handsome, talented, and kind prince. How could I *not* be happy? But I had been so scared that I had tried to forget that happiness for the longest time.

At this point, the piled-up embarrassment from the whole conversation got to me, and I couldn't stand it anymore. I ran away from the drawing room, leaving Jeord behind.

I really need to do something about my philophobia…and possibly about the awkwardness that comes with it too.

My face felt like it was burning, and I imagined it was bright red. Thankfully, since I'd sprinted all the way to the carriage, Maria and Alan thought that I was blushing because of the exertion.

When Alan asked where his brother had gone, I lied and told him that he had to leave because of an urgent matter. After all that I'd told Jeord that day, just being in the same room as him would kill me from sheer embarrassment.

Maria and I rode on the carriage and left the castle to go back to the Ministry.

Jeord's words had helped me realize my true feelings…but there was one more person that I had to relay them to.

Will I manage to do it? Any more awkwardness today and I think I'm going to pass out...

★★★★★★

My father, Orwen Stuart, King of Sorcié, summoned me.

He told me that he would be speaking with my fiancée, Katarina Claes, and the Wielder of Light, Maria Campbell, about the struggle for the crown and how this led to the spread of Dark Magic.

I myself had only learned of these facts recently, as they had happened when I was still too young to have any memories of them. I remember being surprised, ashamed on behalf of the whole royal family, and sorry toward Katarina.

I have always respected my father's efforts to be a fair ruler, and, as a prince, I believed that what he was going to do was worthy of praise. As a man, however, the matter was not quite as straightforward. My fear was that upon learning the shameful past of my relatives, Katarina would start thinking less of me.

Previously, I had told her that people had died as a result of royal infighting. I feared that would be enough to warrant her distrust, but instead she replied that, no matter how related we were, she knew that the previous king and I were different people, and that the actions of the former would not inform her opinion on the latter.

Her words had made me happy upon hearing them and hopeful now—hopeful that she would react in the same way after listening to father's recounting.

But would she? That story was one covered in blood. I would certainly start seeing someone in a different light, if only slightly so, after learning that their relatives had committed such horrible deeds. This thought, in turn, made me wince.

While I waited for my father to end his conversation with the two girls, time seemed to slow down to a painful extent. As soon as we saw him leave the room, my brother Alan and I quickly made our way toward Katarina and Maria.

Never before in my life had I been so nervous doing something so simple as knocking on a door. When Katarina's familiar voice replied, we walked inside.

The girls were talking to each other, and, when they eventually

noticed that it was us who had entered the room, they seemed surprised.

I smiled as I always did and greeted them, ready to fulfill my duty as a royal. I had to apologize, like my father had already done, for the results of my relatives' fight for succession. Alan, who was of the same mind on this issue, lowered his head alongside mine.

Katarina quickly accepted our apology, and I found myself enamored with the resolve she was showing despite the circumstances. My brother and I thanked her for her kindness, and then I asked her about what I had been the most concerned about.

"So, what did you make of it?"

After I spoke, Alan did too.

"You heard the story from our father. It was dreadful, right? So, do you look down on us too now?"

Silence fell onto the room, and I could not bring myself to look Katarina in the face.

She told us that her opinion of us would never change because of the actions of somebody else. Her eyes showed no hint of lying, nor, as I had worried, hate toward us. Katarina really was the kind of woman I believed her to be.

Maria followed, agreeing with my fiancée and furthering my relief. We thanked both of them and walked them to the carriage that was to take them home.

I prepared to escort Katarina for the first time in a while, and I noticed that she had forgotten her bag. I could have taken it for her, but I realized that this could give me an opportunity to be alone with her.

My plan worked out, and when she thanked me for coming back all the way with her to retrieve her forgotten bag, I revealed that I had kept quiet about it on purpose. She seemed very surprised —a girl as innocent as her would probably never think of doing something like that. Her confused expression as she heard of my plan was lovely as well.

I thanked her again for accepting our apology, and her confusion seemed to disappear. She probably thought that I had wanted to be alone with her to simply state my gratitude again. That was one misunderstanding that I could not accept, so I moved closer to her, grabbing her sides. I told her that I wanted to marry her as soon as possible, and her face flushed. My real intentions had gotten through to her, but, much to my dismay, she started

awkwardly mumbling as if to find an excuse to get away from me.

The thought had been on my mind for a very long time, and I finally confronted her about it. I asked her whether she was scared of me. Since I had confessed my love to her, approaching her like this would always lead to similar reactions. At first, I was happy that she had finally started seeing the advances I made toward her as such, but lately I had started to notice the look of fear that appeared on her face every single time.

I had tried to ignore that reality for a long time, but it was time to confirm my apprehensions. If she were scared of me, I would have to accept her and her fears all the same, just as she had accepted me after hearing the truth about the history of my family. With that said, her answer could very well be devastating for me.

Even before she answered, her silence informed me that my question had hit the mark. As I realized this, my heart burnt with pain. I must have looked pitiful, almost crying, as I apologized for being so slow to notice her fear.

But then she spoke again. She told me that she wasn't scared of *me*. She was scared of *love itself*.

It was now my turn to be surprised. Katarina rarely ever showed any fear to begin with, and she often enjoyed reading romance novels. For the longest time, I had believed that she was simply too slow to understand and too shy to act when it came to love, much like her adoptive brother.

However, she kept talking. This time, she told me that she feared that falling in love could lead her to her doom. I did not understand how those two things could ever possibly be related, but she looked extremely serious, and I kept listening. She explained her fears to me, and while I was still very confused about her motivations, I was relieved to hear that she was not scared of me.

The issue that remained was how to fix this fear of hers, as it was effectively keeping me from romancing her. Just as I stated this, her response made me so happy that I could not keep a straight face. She told me that she wanted to take her feelings—as well as mine—in her own hands.

Despite being engaged to each other, my love for Katarina had been unrequited for a very long time. At first she did not understand my feelings, and after I clearly stated them for her, she seemed to forget about them. Nothing in the world could make me happier than if she was ready to accept them. It felt as if my love

was going to be accepted for the first time, however slightly.

I was reveling in happiness, almost in awe, when Katarina told me something else—that she was now facing a personal hurdle that would temporarily keep her from focusing on romance. I remembered that she had seemed concerned about something since she had started her job at the Magical Ministry, just as she had when she had just joined the Academy of Magic. I knew that she was keeping some kind of secret from all of us, but I would not force her to speak about it if she did not want to. All that I cared about was always being ready to help her in any way I could.

The fact that she had spoken with me about this other concern of hers also made me happy, and I told her with a smile that I would gladly wait for her issues to be over. In response, she thanked me with a look of relief on her face. As for me, I was ready to wait longer. More importantly, what mattered to me was that Katarina had shared her true feelings with me. I could feel the warmth building up in my chest.

Then, all of a sudden, Katarina gave me another preoccupied look. Before I could even ask her what was wrong, she told me about how my confession to her had made her happy. As soon as she was done speaking, she sprinted out of the room, her face now bright red.

I was left there by myself, too shocked to move. Her words kept echoing in my head. I used to think that her reactions to me meant that she disliked me, or even that she feared me. I had assumed that to her, my confession of love had been a surprising thing but not a pleasant one.

"'I could only be happy hearing something like that coming from a person as wonderful as you are...'" I repeated to myself, as if to make sure that I had not merely dreamed it.

I felt feverish, and I must have been so red in the face that one could see steam coming off it. I had loved her for so long. She was the special girl who had brought color into my boring gray life. Even after we grew into adults, this never changed. Thanks to her, I was able to experience emotions that I did not know I possessed.

On this day, I found out that too much happiness made me freeze in place.

★★★★★★

I had to insist that I was fine a few times to convince Maria that my red face wasn't a problem, and by the time she had stopped worrying, our carriage had already reached the Ministry. The workday was also just about over.

Cyrus and Larna came to see us and asked about our summons, so we told them about how we'd shown the king the covenants and promised to help him. We didn't tell them about the story of how Dark Magic spread though. Maria and I had decided that we would keep it a secret, even if it was possible that our two superiors already knew about it.

After talking for a short bit, it was time for everyone to leave and go home. I parted ways with Maria and headed toward the usual carriage for the Claes mansion. Sora walked me all the way there, as he always did—he claimed that it was just a meaningless habit for him.

While I was walking with my colleague, I thought back to Jeord and the conversation we'd had earlier. Just thinking about it was enough to make me blush again... I really needed to get used to romance at least a little bit.

Even in my past life, despite reaching high school, I'd never fallen in love with anyone. Maybe it would have happened eventually, but I died before that could happen. And now, in my new life, I've been subconsciously avoiding love out of fear, my only knowledge of it coming from romance novels.

In both lives, previous and current ones, none of the girls I was friends with seemed particularly interested in love either, so we never chatted about that sort of thing.

I must know someone who's interested in that kind of thing...

I looked to my side and saw Sora, who had traveled through many countries enjoying the highs and lows of life. Surely, he'd had a relationship or two. Or ten.

"Say, Sora, how many girlfriends have you had so far?" I asked him.

"Huh? What's this all of a sudden?" he replied, surprised by my sudden question.

Wait, we had pretty much this same conversation when I wanted to learn about escaping prison cells...

"I just wanted to, you know, learn more about romance. But pretty much none of my other friends have ever had girlfriends or boyfriends. What about you?"

“Go guess what’s going through her head this time...” he mumbled with a sigh, before replying to me, “I’ve had a few, yeah.”

“I knew it! Girls can’t look past a guy as attractive as you, huh!”

Sora fell silent for a moment. “Attractive?” he repeated to himself.

“And how did you end up being boyfriend and girlfriend? Was it, like, fate that brought you together?” I asked excitedly, thinking of how fateful all encounters were in the romance novels I read.

“Nothing like that,” he replied, kind of weirded out. “We’d just somehow end up dating and then break up when things stopped working out.”

This is the least romantic answer possible...

“What?! Are you serious?! Don’t you date because you love each other?! And isn’t breaking up something you do while crying and only because life has been so cruel in splitting you two apart?!”

“You really read too many romance novels. Real life doesn’t work that way,” he sighed, looking at me with pity.

That can’t be true. I know that romance novels exaggerate things a little bit, but those things do happen in real life...right? Why’s he looking at me like that?!

“B-But you do love each other, don’t you? And breaking up is still painful, isn’t it?”

“I just dated girls that I kind of liked, and then we’d naturally drift apart with no fuss,” he replied.

I was shocked by his definition of romance. I had thought that love and dating were sacred things that one had to put a lot of thought into.

“Well,” he then continued, seeing my disappointed reaction, “that could be just me though. Maybe some couples are just like the ones in your romance novels.”

Sora had always been living on the outskirts of society, so maybe his love life had been unusual as well.

“So, did that ever happen to you? Did you ever date a girl because you loved her?” I asked, and he started staring at me.

I was puzzling over whether that look was meant as a *yes*-stare or a *no*-stare, but before I could be certain, Sora sighed again.

“I never understood that kind of thing until recently,” he revealed.

“What kind of thing?”

“Love and such.”

So, does that mean that…Sora also has no experience with real romance? He's just like Keith was originally supposed to be in the game then! He's fooled around with a lot of girls, but he doesn't know anything about true love!

"So we're in the same boat. Neither of us knows anything about love." I was happy to have someone to share my predicament with.

"Don't you force people onto your boat. I said *until recently*. I understand it better now."

If he understands it now…did he fall in love?! I thought he wasn't that attracted to Maria, but I must've been wrong!

"When did you fall in love with Maria?! I didn't notice at all!"

"Huh? What's Campbell got to do with anything?" he asked, obviously confused.

But he's a character from FL2… He's supposed to fall in love with her…

"What?! It's not her? Who is it then?" I inquired.

After staring at me silently for a second, he flicked my forehead with his finger.

"Ouch! What are you doing?!" I shouted. The pain in my forehead was enough to make me mad at him. Instead of addressing that, Sora looked away.

"What's even the point in learning about romance?" he asked.

"I want to learn more so that I can experience it myself t—"

"You can't get ready for romance just by learning about it from other people!"

"What? Really?"

"Let me give you some advice, since I have more experience than you. You can't learn about romance, and you can't learn about love. One day, you just fall in love and realize you can't fight your own feelings, and that's it."

"That sounds so romantic!" I shrieked, impressed by Sora's wonderful advice, and tried to jump toward him to express my deep respect with a hug…but he stopped me by pushing my head away.

Looking from between his fingers, I could see that he was blushing. Maybe he was embarrassed because he'd said something so emotional, just like what had happened to me with Jeord.

He then dragged me to the carriage and basically threw me into it.

On my way back home, I thought some more about Sora's words about love, realizing that they sounded very true…and also

very much like the lyrics to some generic pop love song from my previous world.

You can't learn about love... But will I ever fall in love? I can't even imagine that right now.

At least I had decided to face Jeord's feelings for me, and I'd even told him about it. I also had to do the same with Keith. I knew that the more I waited, the more difficult it would be to bring it up, so I made up my mind to do it as soon as I reached home.

Just thinking about it is so embarrassing I can feel my face boiling... I have to do my best!

★★★★★★

As I, Sora Smith, walked back to the dormitory, I was fanning my head as hard as I could, hoping that it would cool down. As usual, it was *her* fault—that dense Katarina Claes.

She started asking me about romance and love out of the blue. She'd always been so shy (and dense) about this kind of thing that she wouldn't even talk about love when speaking of romance novels, so her question surprised me so much that I just ended up replying honestly. To top it all off, I even started spouting nonsense about how you can't learn about love and this and that. I wished I could disappear from the face of the earth.

I wasn't always like this. I used to be able to breeze through life without getting attached to anything. It all changed when I met her. She just had a way of messing me up and forcing me to do things at her pace. I was scared that her dumb trust and naivety had also infected me.

If somebody had told me I'd find myself having feelings this strong for a girl, I wouldn't have believed them. I had my fair share of experience with girls, and romance had been a fun game for me... But now everything was different. I got excited just because she called me attractive and my heart started racing when she stared into my eyes. I was acting like a kid who'd never slept with a woman before.

What's happened to me? I asked myself, and the worst part was that, whatever had happened, I was enjoying it.

★★★★★★

My carriage eventually reached home. Normally, at this point I

would only have to eat dinner and go to bed—lovely, easy tasks. This time, however, I had something else that I needed to get done.

I gathered my courage and entered the manor, starting to walk to my room when, in the middle of a hallway, I ran into Keith.

"Welcome back... Is anything the matter? You are making quite the weird face," he greeted me, noticing how nervous I was.

"It's nothing! Don't worry! By the way, there's something that I want to talk to you about. Can I come to your room after dinner?"

"Of course. You can come in anytime," he immediately replied with a smile.

He probably thought that I wanted to vent to him about something, as I had previously done many a time. I was grateful for this misunderstanding, since I didn't want to tell him what I wanted to talk about yet. That would make for one awkward dinner.

Having set that up, I went back to my room and prepared for my meal. I was so nervous that I couldn't eat as much as usual, and this ended up worrying Keith even more... Maybe I shouldn't have waited until after dinner after all.

After we were done eating, I went to Keith's room.

"So, what did you want to talk about?" he asked. He looked ready to help me let off some steam, and I felt blessed to have such a good brother. He was always there to comfort me through hard times and to help me solve my problems.

If I think about it, I really owe a lot to him. Nah, I don't even need to think about it.

Keith and Jeord were both incredibly talented, handsome, and kind men. I couldn't get my head around why they would fall in love with me. I knew both of them well enough to tell that they wouldn't confess their love just as a prank or joke, but this only made it more confusing.

Why me?!

I wasn't trying to be self-deprecating or modest. I just thought that I was a pretty average girl. I didn't have any particular talent and I wasn't exceptionally beautiful. The only remarkable thing about me was the rank of my family, which I had in common with the Katarina from the game. Unlike her, however, I had a lot of wonderful, smart, kind, and beautiful female friends—first and foremost, Maria. Both Jeord and Keith had a lot of interactions with these friends of mine, but instead of falling in love with them, they somehow ended up choosing me.

Could it be that they're so used to beautiful girls that they grew bored of them and wanted someone a bit plainer for variety's sake? Or maybe they're just into villainess faces? To each their own, I guess.

"Big Sister? Is anything wrong?" Keith worriedly asked me, bringing me out of my train of thought and back down to earth.

I can't make him worry even more! I'm here to tell him about my feelings and such!

"Keith..." I began, mustering up all of my courage, "it's about when you confessed to me."

"You didn't forget about that?!"

Seeing his surprise made me feel sorry for him. He thought I'd forgotten about it...and, well, I had. Until today. I had forced myself to forget about it. I took a deep breath and spoke.

"I didn't forget it, but I pushed the memory back into a corner of my mind," I continued.

"So my feelings were a nuisance," Keith murmured, and his face grew sadder and more tense.

I'm hurting him again... That's not what I want to do!

"No! I've never thought that for a second. It's just that I'm scared of romance, and I was running away from it without even realizing it," I explained, raising my voice almost to the point of shouting.

"Scared of romance?" he asked, his eyes wide open.

"Yes. I've always thought that falling in love would lead me to my doom. That's why. I was scared, but I never realized it, and just kept avoiding romance altogether, trying to forget about things like your confession. I'm sorry I did this to you after you told me about how you felt."

I lowered my head, and he started gently patting it.

"Thank you for telling me honestly. And I'm sorry for not realizing that you felt that way," he said.

I looked up and saw that he was awkwardly smiling.

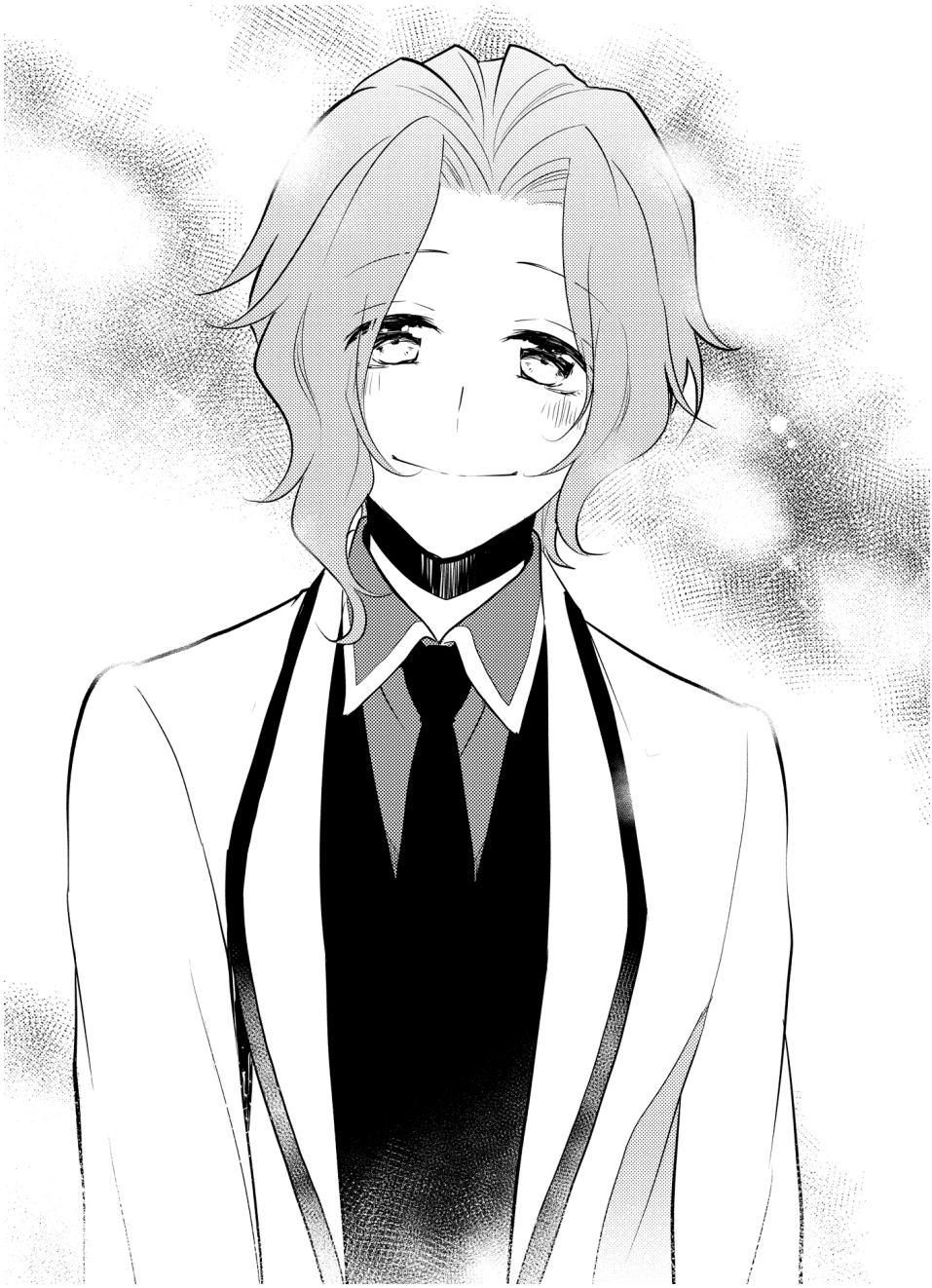
No... That's not how I want to make him feel!

"No, wait! I didn't realize this myself either. Not until now at least. But now that I do, I want to change that," I declared, looking him in the eye, "I want to take my feelings, and yours too, in my own hands."

"Big Sis..."

Now he was really smiling. I was relieved to see that, but I knew that even though I'd managed to bring up this very difficult

topic, I still had something left to say.



"It's just that right now I'm struggling with some *very important stuff*, so... I'll focus on all this once I'm done with that," I promised, and he started giggling.

"I understand. Thank you. And if you ever need some help with that '*very important stuff*' of yours, let me know."

"Of course. Thank you, Keith. You're always such a huge help."

He looked very, very happy. This was the Keith I knew. He was always by my side, smiling.

But there's one last thing I still need to tell him...

"I'm still very confused and scared about love. But I was happy to hear that you love me. I could only be happy hearing something like that coming from a person as wonderful as you are," I said for the second time in a day, feeling my face getting hot once again.

"That's it. Good night!" I concluded, rushing out of Keith's room before he even had time to reply.

I ran into my room, where my bright red face ended up making Anne worry for me.

"I'm fine, I was just sprinting through the hallways."

"You know that you should not do that, or your mother will be angry at you again," she calmly responded.

"You're right... I'll be more careful," I replied, grateful that mother hadn't seen me run.

I drank some water and waited for my face to cool off before going to bed. I didn't know that just telling someone that you were happy about their confession could be so painfully embarrassing. I was obviously still a rookie when it came to romance. However, I didn't want to see Keith and Jeord making those sad faces anymore.

That's one more reason to fight the game's doom! I can't just go and disappear after I've told those things to those two. I'll survive FL2 *and I'll face my feelings. I'm not going to run away anymore.*

I needed to think about my plans regarding the game and the doom it threatened me with, but today I'd done and said things that I'd never done and said ever before. I was exhausted.

I fell asleep within seconds and had a beautiful dream where I saw Keith and Jeord smiling happily.

I'm going to do my best.

★★★★★★

When I heard that my sister Katarina had come back home, I left my room to greet her and see how she was doing. I found her in the hallway and noticed that she seemed to be worried about something. I asked her what was wrong, but she nervously replied that she was fine and that she wanted to talk to me after dinner. She often asked me to listen to her troubles, and I imagined that something had recently happened to preoccupy her.

"Of course. You can come in anytime," I replied, making sure to smile.

Katarina wasn't her usual self during dinner—whatever was on her mind must have been rather serious. I prepared myself to lend her a shoulder to cry on and possibly make her feel better.

After dinner, as promised, she visited my room. She was wearing a serious expression on her face, and she didn't even notice the tea and sweet treats I had prepared for her. Knowing her, this last part was most concerning, and it showed just how distressed she was.

When I took a better look at her to assess her situation, I noticed that she was spacing out. Worried about her, I asked if she was okay, and she looked back at me as if she'd just woken up. She then revealed the topic that she had come here to discuss: my confession of love to her.

I was honestly surprised to know that she even remembered that at all. It happened as I had been kidnapped by a Wielder of Darkness and I was left in a barely conscious state. I had revealed my feelings to Katarina, making it clear beyond any doubt that I loved her.

However, *something*—be it her shyness, be it her dullness when it came to romance—made her forget about it.

"I didn't forget it, but I pushed the memory back into a corner of my mind," she explained.

I understood this to mean that my love was nothing but a nuisance for her. After all, I knew that she saw me only as a brother, and as I disclosed my feelings, I was well aware that they were unlikely to be welcome. Nevertheless, having this truth relayed to me by Katarina in person was extremely painful...until she explained herself further.

Almost screaming, she explained that she was simply scared of love itself. I was once again surprised and confused by her words. She then said that she feared that love would lead her to doom, a

notion that made absolutely no sense to me. Then again, since most other things that came out of my sister's mouth made absolutely no sense either, I just silently kept listening. Katarina went on to elaborate, saying that her avoidance of love stemmed from a subconscious fear.

I blamed myself for not noticing that despite always being so close to her. To me she had been an always-smiling girl who didn't have a fear in the world.

She lowered her head apologetically, and I patted it, thanking her for having honestly spoken to me and asking for forgiveness for how I never noticed how scared she was. She looked up at me, and I tried to smile at her, but maybe my expression wasn't as reassuring as I thought.

After a moment of silence, she spoke again. "I didn't realize this myself either. Not until now at least. But now that I do, I want to change that. I want to take my feelings, and yours too, in my own hands."

How could I think that she's a weak girl that I need to protect? Her honesty is commendable...

I wasn't in pain anymore—I felt my chest fill up with warmth as my love for Katarina grew even stronger.

However, she awkwardly informed me that she had some pressing matters keeping her busy at the moment. I knew that she could only focus on one task at a time, and I could imagine that whatever was keeping her preoccupied had to do with her work at the Ministry.

She didn't have to go so far as to mention that, but this hapless honesty was part of her charm, and I couldn't help but smile at her. I told her that I understood and that she could rely on me if she needed help, and she seemed very happy about it.

"You're always such a huge help," she responded, as if it was the most natural thing in the world. Once again, I found myself smiling.

She wants to take my feelings into her own hands... After all those years of fearing that my love would forever be unrequited, that she would never look at me as a man, and that she would always forget my feelings as soon as I confessed to her, I never even dreamed that I would hear words like these coming from her.

Katarina quickly followed her tug at my heartstrings with another, even stronger one. "I was happy to hear that you love me.

I could only be happy hearing something like that coming from a person as wonderful as you are," she told me, blushing, before saying good night and literally running out of my room.

I stood there, dumbfounded, trying to process what I had just heard. I repeated what she had just said to myself, starting to wonder whether I was dreaming. I even tried pinching myself on the cheek just to be sure. It hurt. This was no dream—but it had to be. This could never happen in reality. I pinched my other cheek too. It also hurt. It was safe to assume that this was all real and that Katarina had told me that she was happy to hear me confess to her.

"Whaaat?!" I screamed, unable to contain myself.

"I-Is anything the matter, young master?" a servant, who was standing right outside my room, asked in surprise.

I nervously put a hand over my mouth to stop my excited shouting.

"I-I'm fine... I'm going to sleep now. Good night."

I went to bed and pushed my face onto a pillow, trying to calm down...but to no avail. I was now rolling from side to side, unrestrained, as I had never done even as a child. I was so happy that I feared my heart could explode from the sheer joy.

She was happy to hear it... A person as wonderful as I am... And the way she blushed as she said those things...

I kept thinking back to that, still rolling in my bed almost until dawn.

Chapter 2: Let's Go to the Castle's Library

The next morning, I was too embarrassed to look Keith in the face, but for better or worse, he had left early with father on a work-related trip, so I didn't encounter him. I was grateful for that, because I thought that the awkwardness of seeing him would probably subside after a day or so.

I didn't have work at the Ministry that day, and I normally would have spent my free time working in the fields, but I had more urgent things to think about—I had to find more information on *FL2* and its bad ends, especially now that I had decided to seriously think about Jeord's and Keith's feelings.

My plan was to go to the castle's library. Since I was the daughter of a duke and the fiancée of a prince, they'd let me use it if I asked for permission. The reason why I wanted to go there was the Japanese-language note about the game that I'd found between the pages of the romance novel in my bag.

I had asked several people, including Sophia, who had lent me the novel to begin with, whether they knew about that note and if they'd seen any others like it, but they didn't know anything about it. I even checked Sophia's own library but found nothing.

The only explanation I could think of was that the note had found its way into the book while I was at the castle. So although the chances of actually finding anything were slim, I decided that visiting the library was worth the effort. And it was some effort, for sure, considering how many books were kept in that place. The idea of having to wade through all that paper kept me from putting this plan into action for a very long time, but I knew that, sooner or later, I had to act. Once at the castle, I would also visit the storage room where my bag had been kept when the note was put inside it.

I prepared myself and then boarded the carriage, ready to go to the castle for the second day in a row. I had already asked for permission to enter the library beforehand, so there was no

problem. I was on my way there when I saw a familiar face walking toward me.

"Oh, Prince Alan!"

"Hm? Katarina? You're here again? What gives?"

"I don't have work today, so I took the opportunity to check the library here."

"*You* visiting a *library* in your spare time?" he asked mockingly.

True. I usually never use my head in my spare time. It's all about farming. I didn't even visit the library very often while I was at the academy.

"Please. It's very normal for a lady like me to do some research for her own enjoyment," I replied, glossing over the fact that I'd never done so before in my life. I was trying to look offended, but Alan didn't seem impressed.

"Whatever. Try not to fall asleep."

The prince had grown a lot in the past few years, but inside he was still a kid.

"Smugface bullypants..." I whispered to myself. However, Alan somehow heard me.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing."

"No way! I can tell it's an insult!"

"If you can tell, then there's no need to ask me what it means!"

"What's with the attitude, dull duchess?!"

"You're the one insulting me now!"

"But you're the one who started it."

"Because you were mocking me!"

"I just told the truth."

"How dare you?!"

We kept bickering for a while, but then, all of a sudden, Alan started laughing.

"Huh?" I stared, confused.

"It's just, you know, it's been so long since we last argued like this. It's kind of funny," he replied.

The innocent smile he now had on his face made me forget why I was offended, and I started laughing along with him.

"You're right. You always teased me like that when we were kids, and then we'd start fighting!"

"Yeah, well... I guess I couldn't help myself," he replied while awkwardly scratching his head.

When I first met him, he was constantly troubled by his inferiority complex toward Jeord. Alan had become so much calmer now that arguing with him felt somewhat nostalgic.

"I'm sorry for being like that back then," he added.

"You're apologizing for that? Now?!" I fired back, surprised that he'd say something like this more than ten years after the fact.

"I know it's been due for a long time. But I just realized I'd never apologized to you for it... Also, thanks."

The look of confusion on my face made him laugh again, so I couldn't even ask him what he was thanking me for.

Oh, right, I should ask him about that...

"Say, Alan, what do you know about love?"

Sora had told me that love and romance weren't things you could understand by asking people, and I agreed with him, but maybe hearing different opinions would help me realize it earlier when and if love happened to me. At least, there was no harm in asking.

Not that I had great expectations for his answer—his engagement to Mary was a political one, and the two of them didn't really seem to be in love with each other. I imagined he'd just be another entry in the "not knowing anything about love" club.

"Wh-Why are you asking me that out of the blue?" he stammered, blushing.

"What? You don't possibly mean...you do know something about romance?!" I replied.

More than future wife and husband, Mary and Alan looked like a crime boss and her lowly thug. Thinking that they really loved each other was shocking.

"Don't act so surprised! I'm an adult, you know? Of course I know about it... What about *you* though?"

"Well... I..." I paused, trying to come up with a good reply. I couldn't just tell him that I didn't know the first thing about the topic, or he would have started mocking me again.

"Let me guess," he jumped in before I could talk, "love's still a mystery to a kid like you, huh?" As expected, he had already started mocking me.

"Not at all!" I instinctively replied, offended that he was making fun of me.

"So...you *do* know something about romance?" he wondered, looking dead serious. "Then... Who are you in love with?"

“W-Well, er...” I hadn’t thought that far yet.

“Is it Jeord? Did you end up...?!”

He was getting so wound up that I ended up stopping him and admitting my lie.

“I’m sorry, I lied. I don’t know anything about love and such. I just didn’t want to say it...”

For some reason, Alan seemed relieved to hear that.

Could it be that he was also lying and he doesn’t know anything about love either?

“Oh, I see. So you don’t know about that yet. Yeah, yeah,” he muttered, nodding to himself. He was probably mocking me again. He looked so satisfied that I wanted to ask him whether he was lying too, but he said that he had to leave for work. “Good luck with your homework.” He patted me on the head before skipping away like the happiest man on Earth.

It’s not homework. It’s research, I thought as I walked toward the library, disappointed that asking Alan about love had been a waste of time.

★★★★★★

I, Alan Stuart, was lighthearted as I headed to work. It turned out that my very brief despair had all been caused by a misunderstanding. First and foremost, I was happy to be able to see Katarina two days in a row.

On the previous day, when I heard from father that he’d be telling her about our family’s violent history, I was so worried about what she’d think of us that I remember feeling dizzy. While he was talking to her, time seemed to stand still. I could imagine Katarina coming out of there and saying that she never wanted to see us again.

Thankfully, she said that it didn’t matter to her, because what our relatives did was their fault and not ours. She looked so cool as she said it that I ended up falling even deeper in love with her. I noticed the loving gaze that Jeord was pointing at her, and I quickly looked away. After all, she still was *his* fiancée.

When I saw him escort her out of the castle, I cursed myself for falling in love with my brother’s fiancée of all people. But what could I do? There were no other women like Katarina. I couldn’t stop wanting her.

Just like me, my own fiancée Mary was also in love with someone she shouldn't be in love with. She insisted that this wasn't going to stop her, but I couldn't be that optimistic.

Jeord and Katarina were going to get married. I had to give up. The one thing giving me hope was that everyone knew how much Jeord loved Katarina...except for Katarina herself. She was too immature, or naive, or whatever, to understand that.

That's why, when she told me that she knew about love, I feared that she'd finally fallen for my brother. Thankfully that was just a misunderstanding, and, as I'd thought, she didn't know the first thing about romance. When I heard her admit that, I couldn't have been happier. I knew that I'd have to give up eventually, but I wanted to hold onto hope for as long as possible.

As I kept walking, I raised the hand that I had used to touch her hair and pressed it against my lips.

★★★★★★

The castle's library wasn't that big. Only a few people could access it to begin with, and there weren't many specialized books in it, at least as far as I could tell. Of course, maybe there was also a secret underground library like the one at the Magical Ministry—the one full of naughty books.

Since I had already obtained permission, they let me enter without any problem. When I walked in, I saw someone already there sitting in front of a desk with a pile of books on it, reading. That day must have been a day for unexpectedly meeting friends, because, when I looked more closely, I realized that the person reading there was Nicol.

I greeted him and he turned around, smiling as he noticed me. Whenever he smiled, you could just imagine a background full of blooming roses appearing behind him. His attractiveness was as magical as ever, and, since I hadn't met him in a while, it took me a second to snap out of it.

"Are you here for work?" I asked.

"Yes, and you?"

"I'm just here to research something."

"I see. What would that be?"

"Hmmm... Old folk tales."

Even with its relatively limited size, I couldn't hope to read

through every single book in the library, so I had to focus on a specific genre. I wanted to look for romance novels, since that was the kind of book where I had found the note about the game, but this library had nothing of the sort on its shelves, and the same was true for other similar genres. The closest thing they had here were old folk tales.

A librarian informed me that while they did have quite a few books of folk tales, if I only needed to flip through the pages I could probably go through their whole collection in one day.

"In that case, you will find them over there." Nicol pointed to a corner of the library.

Wow, he even remembers where different genres are!

"Thank you!"

"You are welcome." He immediately went back to his reading.

Even the way he looked at his book was attractive, but I had no time to lose and opened the first folk tale book I found. At first, I had planned to only flip through the pages, but some of the stories in there were so interesting that I found myself reading them to the end. There was a story about some magicians who'd traveled to Sorcié from far away lands, a story about an altar that was built to increase magic powers, a story about using magic to seal away a rampaging monster, and so on. There were stories from all areas of the kingdom, and they all were so unique that I lost myself in reading.

"—rina. Katarina."

While I was completely absorbed in the book, I heard Nicol's voice calling my name.

"You seem to be very focused," he observed, looking at me with the hint of a smile on his face.

"Yes... I lost track of time," I replied, embarrassed.

"It just so happens to be lunchtime. Do you already have plans?"

"What?! It's lunchtime already?!"

I'd been so enthralled in that book that I'd spent all morning reading it, forgetting about the real reason I was here.

"I have brought my lunch," I explained, "and I thought I'd eat that outside, since the weather is so nice today." Also, eating in the library was forbidden, so that was another reason to eat at one of the tables in the garden.

I continued, "Would you care to join me? The food I have is too

much for one person anyway." I thought back to just how much I'd asked the Claes cooks to make. It was the first time in quite a while that I had them prepare my lunch, and I was so excited that I ended up requesting a veritable feast. I didn't want that to go to waste though, so I would have appreciated Nicol's help consuming it.

He thought for a while. "It would be my pleasure."

We walked into the garden and laid out the delicious-looking results of the cooks' efforts on the table. Nicol and I both started eating.

Munch... Munch... Munch...

"Hmmm! This is so good!"

I hadn't eaten outdoors in a long time, and today's lunch had been masterfully tailored to my preferences. I had nothing against the usual meals at the Ministry's cafeteria, but right now every bite filled me with sheer joy. I saw Nicol eagerly eating as well, and I remembered how he'd cooked for us when we all went to the orphanage.

"The things you cooked for us that one time were delicious too. It's incredible that you're also a good cook!" I remarked, impressed by how he seemed able to do just about anything.

"Oh, our cooks did most of the work. I just lent a hand here and there," he demurred, but I knew that he was just being modest, as his loving sister Sophia had told me how he'd spent the whole night cooking.

He looks dangerously attractive, but inside he's a humble, reasonable guy whom anyone would want as an older brother. The contrast is almost disturbing. Now that I think of it, maybe he knows more about love than Alan does. I should ask him my usual question about that...

"Say, do you know anything about ro—" I started, but I immediately stopped as I remembered something that he'd told me years ago, before we even went to the academy.

I'd casually asked him whether he had a crush on anyone, and he confessed that he loved someone that he wasn't supposed to. That meant that he already knew at least something about romance and love, and thus asking the question I was going to wouldn't be a good idea.

"What is the matter?" he asked curiously.

How can I fix this? Ugh...

"Y-You know how you mentioned you had a crush on someone

back in the day? I was just wondering if you still have the same feelings for her. Like, what would you say if you met her today...?"

That was way too direct! I thought, regretting ever bringing up the topic at all. I knew that he'd been very sad about his forbidden love, and I also knew that his family had later convinced him to meet potential fiancée candidates... I couldn't have asked a more hurtful question.

"O-Of course, you don't need to answer that if you don't want to..."

Before I was even finished saying that, Nicol spoke as well: *"I love you."*

Being told that while he looked straight into my eyes made my face feel hot.

"I-I see! That's what you would say to *her*... Right?" I asked, and he nodded.

He'd always been a man of few words, and I often ended up misunderstanding him.

I thought he was saying that to me for a second...

"I tried to forget these forbidden feelings of mine..." he explained.

So he even went through those matchmaking efforts while still loving that mystery person...

I wondered who his crush was, and why being together with her would be a problem. I'd considered the possibility that maybe his crush was a *him*, not a *her*, but even then I knew that men were just as attracted to him as women were. The only remaining explanation was that he'd fallen in love with a woman who was already married.

I'm afraid there's no help for it if that's the case. It's so sad.

After a short silence, he went on, still looking at me. "But I can't. I can't change the way I feel." Even though I knew that he was talking about somebody else, hearing a guy that handsome say those things was basically giving me a fever.

"And I know that I'll never feel this way again, not to this extent..."

I wish he wouldn't say things like that with that sweet voice and hot stare of his... I mean, I'm the one who asked, but...my immunity to his handsomeness has really faded after all this time spent without any meaningful interaction with him...

And then, he dealt the finishing blow. *"I love you,"* he declared

once more.

There was so much passion in his voice that my head couldn't take it anymore, and I just passed out.

★★★★★★

As I, Nicol Ascart, held the just-fainted Katarina in my arms, I was torn between panic and regret. Seeing her for the first time in so long already had me overjoyed, but eating with her, just the two of us, made the excitement get to my head. I even spoke romantic phrases that I would never normally utter, only because she mistakenly thought that I was not speaking directly to her.

The way she blushed and shook her head, as if to convince herself that, indeed, I was not talking to her, was so endearing that I could not help myself. I went overboard. She fainted.

Just like my sister Sophia, Katarina loved reading romance novels, but she was not used in the least to hearing romantic declarations toward herself. I had seen with my own eyes how shocked she looked every time her fiancé Jeord made advances toward her. What I found most lovely was how a girl so brave and forward as she would suddenly turn timid when it came to these matters.

I was also surprised to learn that she still remembered what I had told her many years ago, while we danced together at the ball to celebrate her coming of age. I had honestly almost forgotten about ever saying that myself.

Now she felt so light in my arms, and she had the pleasant smell of a sunny afternoon. The object of my forbidden desires was literally in my arms, and I started conjuring dreams of making away with her. It was then that my savior appeared to keep me from sin.

"Brother, what has happened?" Sophia asked, holding a lunchbox as she looked at me. Her gaze immediately erased all traces of sinful thought from my head.

"You could not have come at a better time. Thank you," I replied, explaining the situation to her and asking for her assistance in dealing with it.

★★★★★★

Pink walls, a black table, and a metal-frame bed with azure duvets and blue cushions... This was Acchan's room. I was dreaming

about my past-life friend again, and this was a great opportunity to see her play *FL2*.

I couldn't choose what part of the game she played, but I hoped to see something about the new characters that were closely related to my doom: Sora, Cyrus, Dewey, and the hidden character Cezar. Since I knew that there was also one more hidden character in the game, I really wanted to see him too.

As if to punish me for my overly wishful thinking, the first character to greet Acchan as she turned on the screen was Jeord. *"Hello, my beloved."*

I was very disappointed—not because I had anything against Jeord, of course, but because, as far as I knew, the returning characters from *FL1* had nothing to do with Katarina's bad ends in *FL2*.

There go my hopes of getting some useful information...

"It has now been a year since you entered the Magical Ministry. You have grown so much through your efforts there," Jeord, inside the screen, continued.

One life ago, looking at him say something like that in-game was enough to make me swoon. Post-reincarnation, I was becoming used to hearing those things from him in person, so this was nothing in comparison.

After some more sweet remarks from Jeord, Maria gave him an equally sweet reply.

This feels normal because it's in the game, but saying those things in real life would be so awkward... I'd be so embarrassed, I'd pass out.

The game then transitioned to an image of Jeord hugging Maria. *"Will you marry me?"* he asked. Of course, after two games' worth of relationship building, Maria gladly accepted. Cue ending cutscene and credit roll.

This was my first time seeing one of the endings to *FL2*.

Tsk, look at those fiends in the credits. Those are the ne'er-do-wells who make a living out of coming up with ways to kill me! Hm... Huh? Wait a second. What did Jeord say again? It's been a year since you entered the Ministry? That sounds kind of impor—

"—rina. Lady Katarina!"

I woke up to a pair of red eyes, framed by white hair, staring at me.

"Sophia?"

Nicol's younger sister, my beautiful childhood friend, was in front of me.

What just happened? I went to the library to look for more notes, then I met Nicol, and we were having lunch together, and then...what?

"Sophia? Why am I here?" I asked, seeing how I was not outdoors, where I remembered being, but indoors, and in addition to that, lying on a bed.

"You lost consciousness while talking with my brother," she explained, sounding very sorry about it, "and he then carried you here."

Oh, right. I passed out from his handsomeness.

"I see. I'm sorry I bothered Nicol like that. Where is he, by the way?"

I wanted to apologize to him, but he was nowhere to be seen.

"He was very worried about you, but unfortunately he could not get away from work... He reluctantly left you in my care and went back to his duties," Sophia replied.

"Oh, of course, he was working before we had lunch together. I really need to apologize to him for all the trouble."

"Not at all! He was overjoyed to be able to spend time with you alone after so long," she replied, and then, in a whisper, she added, "so overjoyed that he lost control and caused this..."

I couldn't quite make out that last part, but at least it seemed I hadn't been too much trouble for Nicol, which was a good thing.

"I'm glad to hear that. I was also happy to talk with him for the first time in a while."

"Thank you. He will be more than happy to hear that." Sophia wiped her eyes with her handkerchief as if she was crying.

"Yeah... And, so, by the way... Why exactly are you here?" I asked. I didn't know of any reason why Sophia would be at the castle.

Maybe she comes here to help like she sometimes does at the Ministry?

"I came to deliver my brother's lunch to him, as he had forgotten it at home. My father told me he was in the library, but he was not there, so I went to look for him and eventually found him just as you were passing out."

"My oh my, that was one unbecoming scene to show you. I didn't know that he had forgotten his lunch by the way."

"He may be very thorough, but he is not perfect," Sophia

giggled.

I guess he can be kind of an airhead sometimes...

"He asked me if I had plans for lunch, but now I wonder what his original plans were."

"There are some places in the castle where they serve food to guests, and he probably meant to go there. But I was free today, so I decided to come here to see how he was doing and to deliver his lunch. Our cooks had already prepared it, so it would have been a waste not to do so. But I was luckier than I expected, as I was able to see you too." Her smile made me happy.

"I'm also glad I could see you!" Back at the academy we used to be together every day, but after graduation, we hadn't had as many chances to see each other.

"I forgot to ask my brother about this," she spoke again, "but why are you at the castle today?"

"Oh, me? I'm just researching some old folk tales... For work," I replied, not entirely truthfully, "but when I started reading, I lost track of time and got hooked..."

"Folk tales can be very interesting too, can they not?" Sophia also loved books.

"I know, right? I wasn't expecting it, but there was some really cool stuff in there..."

We started discussing folk tales, a topic about which an avid reader like Sophia had plenty to say. If anything, she sounded very excited as we talked about these stories.

When I realized how much time had passed, I told her that I should get back to the library. She was worried about me since I'd passed out, but I waved away all of her concerns—swooning never killed anybody.

Learning from the mistake I'd made that morning, I made sure not to spend too much time on any individual book, checking many different ones instead. As a result...I found nothing. I wasn't really expecting to, but the lack of success still made me sad. The library visit had been for nothing, the dream had been for nothing, and when I went to the storage room where the note had ended up in my bag, that was for nothing too.

The sun was setting, and I'd checked all that I could check for the day. It was time to go home. As I walked under the gradually darkening sky, I thought back to the man I'd met the day before.

When I'd heard that he was a shut-in, I'd assumed that he was an introverted, weak-willed kind of guy, but in reality he was nothing like that. I was used to the mean stares I got from other noble ladies who thought me unfit to be Jeord's fiancée, but the things he told me were even meaner, and darker.

"What are you doing here, Katarina?"

Surprised by that voice, I looked up.

"Prince Jeord!"

Seeing him made me forget all about the young man, but it also made me remember the embarrassing events of the previous day. I'd hoped we wouldn't meet for at least a while, but from the way he addressed me, that probably wasn't true for him. Fighting the awkwardness of it all, I explained the reason why I was here just as I'd done to Sophia.

"I am glad I saw you on your way out then. It must be fate bringing us together," he declared with a giggle.

Same old Jeord. It's like what we talked about yesterday didn't even affect him at all. Maybe I'm just thinking too much of it.

"I will walk you to your carriage," he then announced, taking my hand. As we walked together, he commented on what I'd told him just earlier. "I see that you are working very hard, doing research on your days off."

"Well, that's kind of rare, actually..." Usually my days off were spent tending to my vegetables.

"It has now been half a year since you entered the Magical Ministry. You have grown so much in this time."

Hm? This sounds oddly familiar... Ah! It's the line from the game! Except it's half a year instead of a full one, since I haven't been working for that long. Something still sounds off though...

In what felt like an instant, we reached the carriage. He helped me aboard and then kissed my hand, making me jolt in place.

"I will be waiting for you to resolve those pressing matters of yours," he told me with a smile, referring to my words from the previous day.

I just sat there, blushing and fidgeting, until the carriage finally started moving.

Why is he like this?! Are handsome princes born with the ability to charm girls? Is it genetic?

It took a while before my face cooled down to its normal temperature.

“Welcome back, Big Sister,” Keith greeted me in the most charming way possible once I was home.

Right, I said those embarrassing things to him too yesterday. That’s probably why he’s being so charming... Even my brother *is doing this to me now...*

“H-Hi...” I replied, taken aback by the handsome aura he was emanating.

“You must be tired after doing all that research in the library.” As he spoke, he patted my head, like he often did, but this time it felt different. It felt...sensual.

Please, Keith! I’m close to the edge here! My face’s temperature immediately rose back to a feverish level.

“Th-Thanks. I’ll go change,” I sputtered, completely defeated by the sexiness overload, and I headed to my room. I realized that, despite turning out to be nothing like the womanizer he was in the game, Keith still had the make-girls-swoon gene in him.

After I finally got a chance to calm down, I went to have dinner. This time Keith’s presence didn’t fluster me too badly, maybe because the rest of my family was also there, or maybe because we didn’t interact that much. I finished my dinner and went back to my room, exhausted because of all that had happened that day, and I immediately went to bed.

I hadn’t gained any useful information about the game, but I felt that I was missing something very important.

It’s time to think about this properly.

Meeting chairwoman: Katarina Claes.

Meeting representative: Katarina Claes.

Meeting secretary: Katarina Claes.

“Well, well, well, everyone. Let’s try to see what we are missing here.”

“Are we even missing anything? Are you sure?”

“I cannot prove it, but something just feels off.”

“Precisely. And we need to understand what that is.”

“Could it be today’s lunch? Was something off about the sides?”

“Oh, today’s lunch was delicious. The Claes family’s cooks really are great.”

“Indeed they are...but I suspect that lunch has nothing to do with this.”

“Then it could be Nicol, with whom we had lunch.”

“He really was too handsome to handle.”

“That was something to behold!”

“But there was nothing wrong about him specifically.”

“Then, maybe…Alan? We still don’t know whether he knows anything about romance or not.”

“He was probably just acting tough. I’m sure he doesn’t know the first thing about it.”

“Yes, that is very likely. That being said, I think that is not the answer we are looking for either.”

“Then it must be Keith. Why was he so sexy today?”

“He was always sexy, I guess, but today it was on a whole different level. It’s like having a Nicol in our own house.”

“Perish the thought! We would lose consciousness every single day. But no, Keith was not the problem either.”

“Well, that only leaves Jeord. He was also sexier than usual, and the things he said sounded even sweeter too.”

“The things he said… Of course! *That* is what was off!”

“You mean when he told us that he’d be waiting for us to resolve our matters?”

“No, before that!”

“The part about it being half a year since we joined the Ministry?”

“Exactly!”

“Well, but that’s true. It has indeed been half a year, more or less.”

“That’s not the point! That line came from the game!”

“Yes, sure. Except in the game he said *a year* instead of *half a year*.”

“He did—and then the ending played.”

“So…?”

“So there is one year between when Maria entered the Ministry and when the game ends!”

“What?!”

“Huh?!”

“Katarina, you’re a genius…”

“Were you a detective in a past life or something?”

“Oh no, not at all… Probably.”

“Maybe we should open up a detective agency. What do you think? Let’s get started on that!”

“We could call it the *Super Genius Detective Katarina Claes Agency*!”

“Oho... Enough flattering! Let us go back to the issue at hand.”

“Yes, ma’am!”

“Yes, ma’am!”

“We now know how long we have until the game’s ending. It has been half a year since we started working at the Ministry with Maria, which leaves us with half a year. If we survive for that period of time...”

“We’ll have escaped doom!”

“Exactly.”

“Half a year! Just six short months! At least now there’s an end in sight!”

“Seeing the light at the end of the tunnel surely gives us some peace of mind.”

“Just half a year...”

“We should keep in mind, however, that this half a year may hold yet more surprises for us. We shall keep looking for information and never let our guard down.”

“Yes, ma’am!”

“Yes, ma’am!”

When the Katarina meeting ended, it was already late at night. They were talking about not letting our guard down, but right now they were all dancing with joy knowing that they only had half a year of fear left to face. They were being so loud inside my head that I worried I wouldn’t be able to sleep until dawn.

However, minutes later, I was fast asleep. I must have been really tired.

Chapter 3: Maria's Hometown

The next morning I woke up well rested and happy that I knew how much longer the game's plot was going to last. I managed to withstand Keith's newfound sexiness that had given me so much trouble the day before and smoothly headed to the Magical Ministry.

Once I got off the carriage, as I was on my way to the Magical Tool Laboratory, I saw someone from behind—someone who I hadn't spoken to in a while.

"Good morning, Dewey!" I called him.

Dewey Percy, being only thirteen years old, was younger than me, but we had joined the Ministry at the same time. He had done so through an incredibly difficult admission test, since he didn't have any magic powers but made up for it by being a grade-skipping genius.

"Good Morning, Lady Claes," he replied with a somewhat gloomy voice.

"Is anything the matter? Are you okay?" I asked, worried.

"Yes... I am fine." So he said, yet he looked anything but. He didn't seem sick or anything, just very concerned about something.

"You can talk to me if you want, you know? What's wrong?" I asked, and he looked up at me.

"B-But..."

Before he could come up with a response, he seemed to notice something behind me that worsened his dejected look even further.

I followed his gaze and saw Maria and Cyrus, having fun chatting as they walked together.

I see, his troubles must have to do with Maria, I instantly realized thanks to my renowned powers of deduction.

"Did anything happen between you and Maria?" I asked him, and his face went from gloomy to outright sad.

"Not at all... That is the issue."

I had no idea what he meant, so I kept listening.

"She is such a charming girl. Everyone loves her," Dewey

elaborated.

She sure is.

"I heard that she was recently summoned by the prince," he continued.

Well, actually it was the king who summoned her, but that's a secret.

"And it dawned on me that she is completely out of my league," he murmured, staring down at the floor.

Poor Dewey! He's all out of confidence!

"Awww, Dewey, don't say that. You're amazing yourself! You passed the Ministry's admission test at your age!"

That test was hard even for smart adults, let alone thirteen-year-olds. As if that wasn't enough, Dewey worked in the Magic Powers Department, where all the most skilled Ministry employees gathered. Despite being so young, everyone already had huge expectations for this child prodigy.

"That was probably just luck. I do not have any magic powers, and the family I come from is...not good enough to give me the right to long for Maria. Any comparison with her would put me to shame." Looking at his crush as she walked together with their superior, he concluded, "I wish I could be as wonderful a man as Sir Lanchester is. Unlike me, he is fit to walk beside her."

"That's not true!" I objected, leaving Dewey surprised.

Cyrus may be hiding it well, but he can barely even speak to girls outside of work. Maria is smiling, but just look at how stiff his face looks. He's probably talking to her about martial arts. Actually, he's definitely *talking about that. No way could he talk about anything else with her.*

Cyrus was too shy to even sit in the same carriage as Maria or go out for groceries with her, but since she had asked him to teach her self-defense, he had found a topic that he could manage a conversation about. Dewey was probably closer to her than Cyrus was, since at least he could easily talk to her during meals at the cafeteria.

I wished I could explain that to my very concerned friend, but I had promised to keep Cyrus's real personality secret. I knew that he was terribly scared of girls from our time together in the fields, but most people, including Dewey, mistook him for an extremely cool, fearless guy.

"You're just as wonderful as he is," I finally managed to tell

him.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have mentioned that to you," he replied.

I got this totally wrong...

Unfortunately, since we worked in different departments, I had to part ways with Dewey before I could comfort him in any way. Still worried about my friend, I entered the Magical Tool Laboratory.

"Good morning," I told Sora, who was already cleaning the office, before joining him in that activity.

I considered asking Sora for advice regarding Dewey's troubles, but then I remembered just how grown-up his response was when I last asked him about romance. He probably wouldn't be able to sympathize with the childishly complex romantic struggles of a thirteen-year-old.

"What's with that look of pity you got on your face?" he asked me, noticing the way I was looking at him. "You're thinking something rude about me, aren't you?"

"Nope, not at all," I replied to my extremely sharp colleague.

"Yeah, sure. I bet you are. Just spit it out."

"It's nothing rude! I was just thinking that you wouldn't understand the delicate romantic issues of a person's first love."

"That's definitely rude! You can't just go and decide what I can and can't understand!"

"So you do understand them?!" I gasped, and he started rubbing his knuckles against my head like he always did. "H-Hey! Stop it! You're going to mess my hair up!" I cried, trying to resist, but to no avail.

Hah! He's just trying to distract me because he doesn't understand the first thing about that! I thought, but rather than voicing my doubts, I decided to rub my knuckles against his head too.

Once Sora's hair was slightly ruffled and mine *completely* ruffled, our little fight was interrupted by the arrival of our colleagues. I'd gotten no useful advice from that interaction, but I knew just the guy to go to for help. While we were heading to the room where he would teach me about Dark Magic, I told Raphael about Dewey's problem.

"And so he's lost all confidence. I want to help him, but I don't know what to do," I concluded.

Raphael had a thing for understanding people's feelings, as he

had proven with his wonderful advice on how to deal with a kid whom he had never even met before. I'd always admired him as a talented schoolmate and colleague, but now I looked up to him as a wise teacher that I could always rely on. I was sure that he could help me out with the Dewey situation.

"I believe that you..." he started after thinking for a while.

"Yes?! What should I do?"

"Well, nothing."

"Huh?!" I cried, surprised by this completely unexpected suggestion. I had figured that Raphael would give me some practical advice on what to say or do for Dewey.

"But he's so sad! I can't just let him be!" I desperately explained, and Raphael smiled at me.

"You should be there to listen to him when he wants to talk, yes, but you should probably limit yourself to that."

"But why? You gave me those perfect lines when I had to deal with Liam..."

"That is because I felt that Liam wanted someone's help."

"And Dewey doesn't?"

"Yes. He probably doesn't want anyone to solve this issue for him. This is something that he has to deal with himself."

"With no help?"

"Exactly," he confirmed, nodding his head. "I have spoken with him on a few occasions, and I think that he has a self-esteem problem."

"That being...?"

"He underestimates himself because he doesn't have enough confidence. I don't know the details that well, but I've heard that he comes from a poor family. Maybe that is the reason why he thinks so harshly of himself."

This sounded right—I knew about his family thanks to the note about the game and by having heard about it directly from Dewey. His folks were so poor that he had to work as a kid, while he was still going to school. That was probably why, despite being so smart, he never made a big deal out of it. I used to think that he was just being humble, but maybe that wasn't the case.

"Or maybe someone close to him kept pushing him down..." Raphael muttered with the sad look of one who understood how that felt. "When you lack confidence, what the people around you do barely matters. You must make the change yourself."

"So... I can't help him in any way?"

"That's not entirely true. You can be there for him and listen to his troubles. And if he does end up asking for your help, then of course you can lend it to him," he replied with a smile.

Raphael's words hit me like a truck.

Of course! I was always thinking I should do this or do that...but I can just hear him out! Sometimes, when I'm feeling down, I also just want someone to listen to me.

"Also, remember that Dewey is a man, with all the pride that comes with that. He probably doesn't want a woman to worry for him," Raphael explained with a slightly mocking grin.

"Hehehe, Raphael, I knew I could count on you, and I'm glad I did. Thank you." I smiled at my wise teacher.

"O-Oh, don't mention it. N-Now, let's go," he replied, hurrying toward the room where we had our Dark Magic classes.

Huh, that reaction was a bit weird. Is it me or is he blushing? Strange. Guess he's back to normal now though...

Once we reached our "classroom," we started with the follow-up to last time's lesson: shaping Darkness. Two days before I'd done that without any issue, but this time, for some reason, I could only make the Darkness wobble around a bit without taking on any precise shape.

"Don't worry, you're just starting out," Raphael comforted me with his usual smile.

I do worry about whether I'll get this right in the six or so months I've got left...

★★★★★★

After I was done teaching Katarina her Dark Magic lesson, I told her to go back to the department office before me, and remained in the room, sitting down by myself. I would normally never do something like that, but my throbbing heart needed some respite.

These lessons of ours, I felt, had brought me and Katarina closer together, but the distance between us had become much shorter and had closed so much faster since I had advised her about that one runaway orphan. It seemed that she was now willing to open up her heart to me.

Of course, I was happy to see her rely on me, but I knew of Katarina's bad habit of completely lowering her guard when it came

to people that she trusted. That presented a problem. We spent time together, alone, literally only divided by an arm's length, and there she was flattering me, looking at me with twinkling eyes. I tried to hide just how much this affected me, but after she left, I always found my heart racing.

For years, that dreadful woman's words of spite for Raphael had poisoned my mind: *"You're such a lovely young man, Sirius, unlike that disgusting harlot's son."*

Now, however, I was finally free from that poison. Instead, Katarina's words gave me the strength to go forward.

"You're amazing, Raphael!"

I stood up from my chair, feeling as if I had all the energy I needed for the long day of work before me.

★★★★★★

In the afternoon, as usual, I was supposed to read the covenant together with Maria. Shut into a small room with a dictionary in front of me, just staying awake was a feat in itself. As always, I wasn't making much progress either. I'd finally managed to read past the initial warnings, and I'd reached the part that taught how to summon Darkness out of thin air, like I'd recently learned with Raphael.

That's still so basic...

After struggling not to fall asleep for quite a while, it was finally time for our break. On most days, I took this as a chance to stop struggling and just take a nap, but today I couldn't stop thinking of how Dewey was doing.

In particular, I remembered what Raphael had said about having someone who was always pushing him down. I tried thinking back over all I knew about Dewey, but I realized that it wasn't much. He came from a poor family, studied by himself, went to school while working, and then managed to pass the Ministry's admission test. That was pretty much it.

It wasn't easy to talk to him, since we worked in different departments. That was also true for Cyrus, but at least we always met in the fields, where I'd already learned about how good he was with farming, how bad he was with girls, and so on. In other words, out of all the game's romanceable characters in the Ministry, Dewey was the one I knew the least about.

What kind of guy is he...? I thought to myself, staring at nothing, until a beautiful blonde girl stepped into the aforementioned nothing.

Oh, right. Maria probably knows a lot more about him than I do. They work in the same department and they even come from the same town.

"Hey, Maria, can you tell me a bit about Dewey?"

"Dewey Percy? From my department?"

"Yeah, that one."

"Is anything the matter?" she asked, probably curious as to why I'd ask about him out of the blue.

"I ran into him earlier, and he kind of looked distressed, but I don't know why," I replied. I actually knew the reason why, but I definitely couldn't tell Maria.

"I see... He did make that same impression on me today."

So she noticed too. I guess they spend a lot of time together while working, after all.

"I hope that he has not overworked himself," she said, sounding extremely worried.

"You mentioned that he tends to go overboard with work, didn't you?" I asked.

Right after joining the Ministry, Maria, Dewey, and I, among others, were all sent on a mission together. It was then that Maria had commented on how much of a workaholic Dewey was.

"Yes. He had nobody that he could rely on in his family, so he has always been doing what he could by himself. I believe that this has become a habit for him."

She must be so worried about him because she's the same... She's always trying to do things by herself without relying on anyone.

"By the way, you say that he had nobody that he could rely on, but what kind of family did he have?" I knew that his family was very poor, but that was about it.

Why would a kid even have to struggle to go to school? What happened to his parents?

Maria seemed to think deeply about her answer—I imagined it was no easy topic to discuss. She looked straight at me, and I returned her gaze, silently telling her that I would keep everything she was going to tell me confidential. Understanding this, she nodded and started speaking.

"He has several siblings, but all of them have to work to

support the family."

"And what about his parents?"

"They do not work..."

"Are they ill or something?"

"I have heard that they are more than healthy, *especially* when they go out to drink and have fun."

They make their children work so they can have fun?! She didn't say that outright, but the look of pure disgust on her face must mean just that...

"And when did those siblings start working? How did they go to school?" I asked. I knew that Dewey had barely managed to attend school, so depending on her answer, my opinion of his parents could potentially get much worse.

"I remember that some of them were made to work at home from before they were old enough to even speak properly. It seems that Dewey is the only one who was able to go to school."

As it turned out, they were terrible parents. In my old world, child welfare would have probably taken all of those children away from them.

"Don't other people step in?"

I had been to Maria and Dewey's hometown once, and I remembered that, despite not being as advanced as the capital, it wasn't that run-down either. I assumed that the neighbors or somebody else would speak up against this kind of child abuse.

"Some have tried, but his parents are rather...difficult people. Whenever they hear someone complaining, they respond by treating their children even worse. So eventually, everyone just stopped trying."

Wow, Dewey had it even worse than I thought...

"I wonder," Maria spoke softly, "if Dewey is upset because of something his parents told him."

"N-No, I don't think that's it," I rushed to say, since I knew that his issue was thinking that he wasn't fit for Maria.

I remembered what Raphael had told me about someone close to Dewey pushing him down—he was only guessing, but after hearing about those terrible parents, Raphael's guess started sounding pretty spot-on.

They are the kind of people who would send their children to work while they laze around... I can't even imagine what they could have told their son. Surely it's nothing good.

"You know, when you think about it this way, Dewey's making it into the Ministry is even more impressive than I'd realized."

The Ministry's admission test, which was already extremely difficult, could only have been made worse by the fact that he had to work while attending school. I couldn't even begin to understand how much effort he had put into it.

"I agree. He really is," Maria concurred, and as she did so, her worried expression changed into a smile.

"Listen, Maria, I think that...you should look over Dewey from afar like you always do, but without helping him out unless he asks you to. You know, he's got like, his pride as a man, right? So maybe it's awkward for him when a girl helps him out," I told my friend, basically parroting what Raphael had told me just earlier.

"Pride as a man? I see... I will follow your suggestion," she assented with a giggle.

I know, I know. He's only thirteen, and he looks even younger. Not really what you think of when you say the word "man." I also kind of giggled when Raphael said that... But boys of that age must be going through a lot. I remember that Keith was moody all the time back then, and father explained that I should just let him be. Raphael's advice makes even more sense when I think about it that way.

After we agreed that the best course of action in regard to Dewey would be...taking no action, we went back to reading our respective covenants.

"Whew, I'm done for today. I even managed to stay awake the whole time, albeit barely," I announced once our workday was over.

"I have recently seen a tea for sale that purportedly helps with excessive sleepiness," Maria declared.

"Oh, I need that. Where do they sell it?"

"In a shop near the center of the capital..." Maria explained where the shop was supposed to be located.

"I kind of get it, but I'm not confident I could get there... Oh! I know! Would you go shopping there with me?" I asked her. That way, I would be sure to find it and I would also be able to shop with my friend.

"Of course, I would love to," she replied, and we decided that we would go there as soon as our days off coincided, which, thankfully, was going to be very soon.

I parted ways with Maria, already looking forward to going out with her in a few days, and went back to the Magical Tool Laboratory to get my stuff. When I walked into the office, I found my colleagues inside having a tea break.

"Oh, if it isn't Lady Katarina. Would you care for some tea?" the incredibly muscular Laura, in her perfect makeup and gothic lolita outfit, asked me.

She could look kind of flashy, but, as I knew from going on a mission with her shortly after joining the Ministry, Laura (officially "Guy Handerson") was a very kind and talented individual. Sometimes we had lunch together, and she would teach me about cosmetics and whatnot.

I checked the time, and, since it wasn't that late yet, I accepted her offer. "Thank you. With pleasure." I sat down beside her.

She even poured my tea for me—sweet, kind Laura.

Along with her were the perpetually lost Nathan Hart, the incurable narcissist Nix Cornish, and the ventriloquism-loving Lisa Norman. Not a normal person to be seen.

Not like there's any normal person in this whole department anyway.

"Oh oh oh, I'm so glad that we've been able to finish work on time lately."

"Why, yes, being able to sleep properly has made my skin shine even brighter than usual."

"Having Miss Larna in the office makes a lot of difference."

"It sure does. This is probably the first time she has ever been this present since she became department head."

I listened in surprise to my chatting colleagues. Sora and I usually went home as soon as the workday was over, mainly because we were still newcomers, but apparently all the more experienced people had to stay overtime.

"Was it always that busy around here?" I asked.

"Hah!" Nix exclaimed, suddenly jumping out of his seat. "It sure was! So much so that we would often have to work through the night, leaving me sleepless and my skin depleted of its natural brilliance. It was such a tragedy!"

He was pretending to sigh and cry, and I couldn't do anything but stare, waiting for him to finish.

"He makes it sound made up, but that's how it really was," Laura added, tiredly resting her chin on one hand.

Lisa, or rather the plushie that she used to interact with the world, nodded in agreement.

"That must have been tough, especially if you say Miss Larna has never been this present before..." I mused.

"Yes, but she is still a good superior, mind you. She never complains about how I dress, for example," Laura replied.

"And she also understands the beauty of my wonderful outfits," Nix added, puffing up his chest as he flaunted his sparkling clothes.

"They wouldn't know how to deal with a guy this weird in the other departments," Lisa('s plushie) commented.

"Oh, Lisa! Need I remind you that I was accepted into the Magical Ministry because of my incredible magical skills?"

"I thought you got accepted because a relative of yours put in a good word for you."

"H-Hey! As if you're one to speak! You didn't take the admission test either! You got in on a recommendation!"

"Yes, a recommendation I got because of my good grades and magical prowess. Unlike *someone*."

"Wh-What are you trying to say?!"

"Back at the academy you always were one of the runners-up for worst-performing student, weren't you?"

"I just wasn't trying hard enough back then!"

Seeing Lisa and Nix bicker like that, I thought it was a good opportunity to ask them about something that had been on my mind for a while.

"Have you two known each other for long?"

"Yes, very long indeed," Nix replied.

"Yes, unfortunately," Lisa answered at almost the same time.

These two different replies made them start bickering again, and Laura had to step in to provide me with an explanation: "They're the same age, you see, and they're childhood friends. They even attended the academy together."

The way they were at each other's throats really made it feel like they'd been friends for a *very* long time.

"They mentioned they were both recommended to enter the Ministry. Was it the same for you too?" I asked Laura.

Some people joined through the same admission test that Dewey had taken, and on top of their test score, they needed someone to vouch for them. However, particularly promising academy students were often recruited on a recommendation basis

and could skip the test. Since I knew that Laura had quite strong magic powers, I assumed that the latter was the case for her too.

"Oh, not at all. I just took the standard admission test," she unexpectedly replied.

Everything about her seemed to imply that she came from a noble family and could have taken the easy way in, so learning the truth shocked me.

"Hehe. I'm not only beautiful, but smart too," she declared, noticing my surprise. I thought it was best not to pry any further, in case that was an unpleasant topic for her. "Nathan got in in the same way too," she continued.

"Yes, because I don't have any magic powers," Nathan explained.

"But he's incredible, you know? He passed that test studying all by himself."

Just like Dewey! That's amazing.

"That's very difficult to do, isn't it?" I asked.

"I would say so," he replied after thinking for a while, "as the test isn't only about magic, but a variety of other fields of study as well. However, even though I never formally attended any school, I had several highly skilled tutors teaching me. Saying that I studied by myself would be a bit disingenuous."

"Several tutors? How so?"

"My family is part of a group of traveling merchants. When I was young, the other merchants shared their vast knowledge with me."

"I see. A group of traveling merchants sounds really cool though. Why did you end up leaving them?" I asked him, and Nathan fell silent.

"He was smart," Laura replied for him as she laughed, "but he'd always get lost while they were traveling, so they kicked him out."

"They didn't kick me out. They just...very strongly suggested that I find a job that doesn't involve any traveling," he corrected her.

I'd seen him get lost just walking inside the Ministry, so being part of a group of traveling merchants must have been very hard—for the rest of the group, that is.

"That being said, even with so many talented teachers, passing that test was no small feat. Doing so with no outside help would require an enormous amount of effort," Nathan said, possibly trying

to swerve the discussion away from that embarrassing story.

An enormous amount of effort... The environment that Dewey was in made it difficult to study at all, let alone pass a test that even adults have trouble with. It must have been so hard for him. Even harder than I thought before.

After listening to the argument between Nix and Lisa for a while longer, I left the department and headed toward the gate—by myself for once, since Sora wasn't working in the office that day.

On my way there, I saw Maria and Dewey walking together. The overly respectful distance that they kept between each other made me kind of sad, but, more than that, I felt that I couldn't look at Dewey the same way I used to before. It was as if I could see the weight of all that he'd been through lying on his shoulders. Sprinting for a while would've been enough to reach them, but I decided to leave them alone and rode on my carriage home.

Back at the Claes mansion, I found Keith busy being so obnoxiously sexy that all the maids were having trouble focusing on their work. Thanks to all the other stuff going through my head and the resistance I had built up from years of living with him, I was able to resist his charm. For the sake of the maids around me, I tried to ruffle up his hair and his clothes in an attempt to make him less attractive, but unfortunately this seemed to have the opposite effect.

I need to remember to ask the Ascart maids how they're able to cope with having Nicol in the house. Keith changed so suddenly though...and Jeord too. They got a hundred times more charming just because I told them that I would think about my feelings once I was done surviving doom, but at this rate, I'm scared I won't be able to survive them. *I'm probably going to go crazy from the sexiness to the point I won't be able to think about anything at all...* I thought to myself right before falling asleep.

The next day, I went to the Ministry and did my usual work. It felt like I was running into Dewey more often now that I was worrying about him, but even though he still looked kind of depressed, I followed Raphael's advice and refrained from doing anything about it.

Maria, who was spending the afternoon with me deciphering her covenant, seemed to be worrying and waiting just like me. We

actually spent a few days like this, until it was finally time for us to go shopping together.

I prepared myself and rode on the carriage to the Ministry dormitories, where Maria was already outside waiting for me...with Dewey by her side.

"Good morning, Maria. And Dewey too!"

"Good morning, Lady Katarina," they both replied.

"I will be on my way then," Dewey then declared, ready to go back inside.

"Wait, Dewey. Are you working today?" I quickly asked him.

"No, today is my day off."

"Do you have any plans?"

"Nothing in particular. I was thinking of going to the library." He explained that he just so happened to pass by here and stopped when he saw Maria.

Hey, this looks like a good opportunity. I can't just let him leave like that.

I had decided I'd do as Raphael had told me and just be there for Dewey when he wanted to talk with somebody, but we never had enough chances to talk to begin with.

"Say, Dewey, why don't you come to the city with us?" I suggested.

I took a quick glance at Maria, just to be sure that she was okay with this, and she immediately started nodding her head while looking at me with sparkling eyes. She obviously had no problem with it.

However, Dewey shook his head. "I wouldn't want to be a nuisance while you two are trying to enjoy yourselves."

The way he thought that his presence would be a nuisance made me think that Raphael's theory about Dewey's lack of self-confidence was spot-on. He looked pretty sad, and I knew that I couldn't give up so easily.

"Don't be silly! We'd have even more fun if you came with us. Am I right, Maria?"

"Yes!" she agreed, nodding her head once again. "Come with us, Dewey."

Our friend started looking as if he couldn't decide what to do.

I bet it's different now that the girl he loves so much invited him too. Convincing him won't be so ha—

"Everyone seems to be here today, huh?" a familiar voice

suddenly interjected.

"Er... Miss Larna?" I asked.

"Good morning, Miss Katarina," the owner of the voice replied, waving her hand at me.

The reason I couldn't be so sure of who she was at first was that she looked nothing like she did at work—she wasn't wearing her uniform and had either dyed her hair or was wearing a wig. She was a master of disguise, and while she always looked the same in the office—probably just another disguise too—outside of it she changed her appearance so much that you couldn't even recognize her. Today's disguise was probably in the middle of these two extremes.

"Why are you here?" I asked, remembering how I'd heard that she didn't live in the dormitories as she had a house—or rather a mansion, since she was *probably* a noble—of her own.

"See, I so much as show my face in this place on a day off and they immediately have me running errands," she replied, taking out a piece of paper from her pocket, "Dewey Percy, there's a letter for you here. It's from your family. It was delivered to the department by mistake, and I've been asked to bring it back to you."

Dewey, just like Maria, lived in the Ministry's dormitories. Receiving a letter from one's family sounded like something perfectly normal, but his reaction seemed to imply otherwise.

"What?!" he shrieked with a look of horror on his face.

I guess reacting like this makes sense, considering what Maria told me about his family.

"I came to deliver it immediately because it said 'urgent' on it. If there's any problem that needs to be taken care of, just let me know and I'll try to help out," Larna said, handing him the letter.

She could sometimes forget about everything because of her obsessive love for magic, but, in general, Larna was a good, caring superior. After hearing her say something like that, putting the letter away and reading it later wasn't really an option.

After hesitating for a bit, Dewey opened the envelope and started reading the letter. As he went through it, the expression on his face turned darker and darker.

Maria and I, concerned for him, just looked on and waited for him to say something. Larna, however, made sure we wouldn't have to wait too long.

"What's wrong? Did something happen?" she asked.

“Th-The letter says that one of my younger sisters is terribly ill, and that I should go back home as soon as possible...” he nervously explained.

That’s terrible!

“Dewey! My carriage is parked nearby, so let’s get aboard and go to your home in that!” I suggested.

“B-But...”

“I will come too. Let’s hurry, Dewey,” Maria joined in, grabbing his arm.

He still looked befuddled, but he nodded at her. And so, my shopping trip with Maria was canceled and it was decided that we would go to Dewey’s house instead.

“Uhm, excuse me,” I spoke up once we were on the carriage, “not that it’s a problem or anything, but...why are you coming with us, Miss Larna?”

“I’m curious about Maria and Dewey’s hometown,” she nonchalantly replied.

It’s like curiosity dictates anything she ever does... Oh well, it’s not like I have any reason to stop her from coming.

★★★★★

“Sarah, you are free to spend today however you like,” my master told me.

It was not the first time that he had granted me that freedom on a whim. When it happened, I would usually go back to my room and wait for the day to pass by without doing anything, as I didn’t know what to do with my free time.

However, today I felt restless. That had actually been the case for a while now. Having something to do would have distracted me, but sitting by myself with nothing to do kept me thinking. I thought back to Katarina Claes, and how she had hugged that boy and told him to reach out his hand. That memory deeply agitated me.

I had heard that she was going to be in town for leisure on this day. That woman was the whole reason behind the turmoil I felt in my heart, and I wanted to do something about it—something about *her*. I had been told not to kill her, but anything short of that would have probably been fine. Compelled by an unfamiliar emotion, I left my room.

The people around town will probably know where she’s gone. I just

need to use Dark Magic to make them tell me.

For the first time, I had acted out of my own free will.

★★★★★★

Riding along the familiar road to Maria's town was doing nothing to make the atmosphere inside the carriage less gloomy. Dewey was still clenching the letter in his hands, reading it over and over again.

I'd heard that he and his siblings were very supportive of each other, and something like "come back as soon as possible" meant that his sister's situation was quite scary. I could imagine how anxious he was, and I promised myself to introduce him to a good doctor.

The carriage, which wasn't the fancy Claes family one but an unassuming one I'd had prepared so we could go shopping, took us all the way to Dewey's house. His was even further away from the town's center than Maria's house was.

"My house is not a place fit for people of your class," Dewey told me and Larna as soon as we were there, "so you can wait outside if you want."

"That doesn't matter at all. I'm also worried, so I'd like to go in if you don't mind," I replied, and he agreed to let us in.

"Yeah, doesn't matter to me either," Larna concurred, casually coming after us.

Once we got out of the carriage, I understood why Dewey had said that. Rather than a house, it was a shack, and a flimsy one at that. It looked like a gust of wind would have been enough to take it apart. That was worse than I had expected, but I had seen people living in buildings like those when visiting other poorer towns, so I didn't have any problem going inside one. The confusing part was how such a run-down house was located in this relatively wealthy town not so far from the capital.

When we got closer, the door opened and a young man, probably slightly younger than I was, peered out from behind it. His face was somewhat similar to Dewey's, who confirmed my suspicions by whispering, "He's my brother."

The young man, even though he couldn't possibly have heard a whisper that quiet, noticed Dewey, and seemed to be extremely surprised by his presence. "What are you doing here?!" Dewey's

brother yelled, making it clear enough that he wasn't welcome there.

Even though I knew his parents were terrible people, I had been under the assumption that the siblings were on good terms with each other.

"I received a letter. That is why I'm here," Dewey, who looked hurt by his brother's reaction, answered laconically.

"What letter?"

"Here." He handed the letter to his brother, who gave him a spiteful glance.

"Are you trying to make fun of me? You know I can't read!"

"Oh... Right. I'm sorry," he replied sadly.

Maria had told me that Dewey was the only one in his family who had managed to attend school, so it made sense that his siblings wouldn't be able to read and write. In a country such as Sorcié, where education was free and most of the population was literate as a result, lacking that skill sounded like a disgrace.

"So? What's it say?" Dewey's brother asked without changing his unwelcoming facial expression one bit.

"Well... It says that Bell is very ill, and that I should come back immediately."

"Huh? What are you talking about? Bell's fine."

"What?!"

The two Percy brothers were looking at each other in confusion when an inappropriately happy voice rang from inside the house.

"Oh, is that Dewey?! You came?! I've been waiting for you, my boy!" The voice belonged to a huge guy, who stumbled out of the door making his round belly flop up and down. Judging from his gait and from his red face, he was obviously drunk.

"Dad," Dewey murmured under his breath.

That huge, drunk guy is his dad?! No way! He doesn't look anything like him! Or...maybe he would if he lost a lot *of weight?*

When thinking about the father of such a prim and proper boy as Dewey, I certainly wouldn't have imagined such a dirty, untidy man.

"What do you mean you were waiting for him? Did you send that letter to him?" Dewey's brother asked his father. His voice was clearly angry, but his father didn't seem to notice.

"Oh, yeah, I sure did. My tab at the pub's got so long they won't give me one drop of booze. That's why I called my boy prodigy

back home. He's at least got enough saved up to buy his old dad some liquor, ain't that right? And I knew he'd come back running if I told him that Bell was ill or something like that. He's a sweet one, my Dewey boy," the drunken dad replied, walking toward his young son and giving him a couple of pats on the back, strong enough to make him sway. "So, you see, I need some coin. You send me some every month from that nice salary of yours, don't you? But I need more. Not that much, don't you worry."

There was silence. "The money I send is not meant for you. It's for my siblings," Dewey finally replied, glaring hatefully at the man.

Dewey's brother looked as surprised as I was to learn that he had been sending money back home from his Ministry salary. That unforgivable old man was probably taking all of it for himself, leaving none to those it was actually meant for.

Once again, the man was left unfazed by his sons' anger.

"Whatcha talking about? My children's stuff is my stuff. That's not the problem. The problem's that it's not enough. You should start sending a bit more from n—"

Before the man could finish his sentence, Dewey's brother had grabbed him by the arm, dragging him away.

"Watch it, Ronnie! Can't you see I'm having an important discussion with your little brother?"

Ronnie, as I now knew he was called, didn't reply to his father's complaints. He simply shoved him back into the house and slammed the door closed, standing in front of it so that he couldn't come back outside.

"What's the big idea?! You're gonna treat your own father like this?!" the old man shouted from inside the house while banging on the door. This time it was Ronnie's turn to ignore his father's anger.

"It's just as you heard. Bell is fine. Now leave," he coldly said to his younger brother.

"But..." Dewey, shook by receiving this cold treatment, replied as he looked at the door behind which his father was still shouting, but Ronnie left him no time to say more.

"You left this home, so whatever happens here is none of your business. Now get out of my sight and don't you ever come back again!"

Dewey flinched at his brother's sudden yelling, then he gave up and started walking back to the carriage.

"I am very sorry that you had to see this. I have nothing else to

do here, so...we can go back now," he told us.

"Wai—" I started objecting, but Larna put a hand on my shoulder and shook her head.

Catching her drift, I nodded and silently followed Dewey.

We kept walking like that, without talking, until we reached the carriage. Once we did, Dewey turned around and said, "I've just remembered something that I must do. Please go back without me. I will ride a public carriage later on."

He started running in a direction different than the one we had come from, and before we knew it, he had already gotten quite far.

"I cannot let him go by himself like that," Maria declared.

She was right. He looked like he could burst into tears at any moment. We couldn't just leave him alone and go back by ourselves.

"Got it. We have other things to do, so we can't go with you, but you go and make sure that nothing bad happens to Dewey, all right?" Larna replied.

After nodding in agreement, Maria quickly ran after Dewey, leaving me and Larna alone in the carriage.

"Excuse me... What other things do we have to do?" I asked her.

"Oh, I just thought this might be the *perfect* opportunity to introduce ourselves to the Percy family," she replied with a creepy grin.

It was painfully clear from her face that whatever she was planning wasn't a simple friendly introduction. Still, after seeing the trouble that Dewey was going through and the way his father just laughed it all off, I found myself thinking that letting Larna loose on the guy wouldn't be so bad.

I'm really mad at him right now...

"Okay. Off we go," she said, heading toward Dewey's house, and I followed her.

As we got closer, we heard angry screams coming from inside the shack. We started running, and my fears were confirmed as soon as we were close enough to see what was going on.

The screams were coming from Dewey's father, who was beating up Dewey's brother. He pushed his son down to the ground with that huge body of his and kept kicking poor Ronnie.

"Stop!" I shouted, making the man stop for a moment. Immediately after, Larna used her Wind Magic to blow him away

and against the shack's wall. The man only let out a brief groan before passing out.

She's not kidding around...

Larna went to check on the dad, so I rushed to see how Ronnie, who was still on the ground, was doing. I noticed some kids, probably Dewey's younger siblings, standing to the side with tears in their eyes. I crouched down near Ronnie and saw that his face was swollen from the beating.

"What happened to the old man?" he asked me.

If he's asking that, he hasn't seen Larna using her magic. Good... Pretty much all the people that can use magic are nobles, and they aren't supposed to use it willy-nilly anyway. Of course, this called for it, but it's even better if he didn't notice at all.

"There was a sudden gust of wind, and he stumbled, slammed against the wall, and passed out," I explained.

"Oh," Ronnie replied without questioning my story in the slightest. Maybe it was easy to believe because his dad was constantly drunkenly crashing into things.

Blood started flowing out of Ronnie's mouth, probably from a cut he had gotten while he was being beaten.

"Are you okay? Here, use this." I offered him my handkerchief, but he took one look at it and shook his head.

"I'm good. Wouldn't wanna get it dirty."

"Isn't that the point of handkerchiefs?" I asked, taken aback, and he gave me a sad look in return.

"That's too fine of a luxury for people like me. *This* is what I get to do," he said, wiping off his mouth with his already dirty sleeve.

"People like me..." He sounds just like Dewey. Maybe it's growing up in this environment that makes them think those things.

"Well-off people like you shouldn't hang around a place like this. And also, please tell Dewey to stop sending that money," he continued before I could reply.

After taking a look at his still unconscious father, he addressed his younger siblings, telling them, "go back to hiding in case he wakes up and gets violent again. I'm off to work now."

He tried to wipe off some of the mud that had gotten on his clothes and then started walking off, still bleeding, dirty, and even limping as if he had just hurt his leg.

"You're hurt! You need care!" I cried, but he ignored me and kept walking. I understood that going after him would be pointless,

and trying to fix someone's wounds while he was resisting would have been too difficult.

As I was thinking about what to do, I heard a groan from behind—his father had woken up.

"Sheesh... What was that...?" he said, rubbing his head with his hand and trying to stand up.

"Oh, so the sluggard at last woke up." Larna stood close by.

The man replied with an affirmative grunt. He was probably still drunk, and his face was as red as ever, but seeing a man that big with his eyes full of anger was a scary sight. What made it worse was that not only was he big, but he also had no qualms about beating his own son until he started bleeding.

You could tell that he ate more than enough from his round belly and healthy-looking skin, and the stench of alcohol left no doubts about the drinking either. His kids, on the other hand, all looked pale and overly thin, starting with Ronnie. The more I thought about it, the more I felt the rage building up inside of me.

Unable to control myself, I scowled at the man, angrily addressing him.

"How can you do something like this?! Violence toward children is unforgivable!"

"Huh? What's your deal? They're my children and I do what I want with them. Get out of my face," he told me before starting to yell, "Kids! Where are you?! Can't you see your father is hurt?! Come and fix me up! And bring some money! I need to buy my booze!"

The children seemed to have hidden themselves just as Ronnie had told them, and they were nowhere to be seen. Realizing that his yelling wasn't going to do him any good, the man clicked his tongue in annoyance and slammed his fist against the wall of his house.

"I told you to come out, you brats! If you don't show up right now, you're gonna get double the beating!"

I heard a muffled crying voice come from a tree near the house. A girl who looked like she was around ten years old came out from behind it, carefully trying to protect another child who looked much younger still. The look of surrender on her face was simply devastating.

"What took you so long?! When your father calls you, you gotta hurry up!" the man blustered, raising his hand and getting ready to

lower it forcefully into the girl's face.

I was so shocked that I couldn't even react, but...his arm halted on the way down, blocked by a gust of wind.

"Stop it," Larna coldly ordered the man.

The fear I felt toward the man was nothing compared to the aura of enraged contempt that was emanating from Larna right now. This was probably the first time that I'd ever seen her get mad.

"Let me tell you something, scum," she continued, face completely expressionless. "Kids are not tools. They're *people*, and they're not yours to use as you please."

Once she was done reprimanding the drunkard, Larna sent another gust of wind toward him, flinging him face-first to the ground. He let out a groan and stopped moving.

The children were observing the scene with their eyes wide and their mouths shut. That also went for me, of course. I'd never seen Larna use her magic on someone to that extent, not even when fighting thugs. I didn't know what had caused her to snap like she had, but the drunkard wasn't going to get up for a very long while.

"I-Is it okay to use magic like this?" I asked her as soon as I recovered from the shock. He was going to beat a child, sure, but he was still just a civilian, so this seemed like overkill.

Larna, whose rage had now subsided, thought about it for a while.

"Well, I need to make sure that what happened here stays here. Don't worry about that guy—he'll be unconscious for the whole day at the very least. Be right back," she promised before quickly disappearing.

What am I supposed to do now? At least I don't have to worry about that man, but...

"Are you okay?" I asked the girl who was still standing as if to shield her younger sibling.

Her little shoulders twitched in surprise before she feebly told me, "Yes..."

The fear on her face made me sad. These kids were probably subjected to violence like that on a daily basis.

"Don't worry. That woman who just ran off is going to take care of things," I tried to comfort her, smiling warmly, knowing that Larna would never leave these kids to themselves. She was definitely going to do something about it, and if she didn't, I would.

The girl's terrified frown mellowed out a little bit. She seemed to ponder for a while before nervously asking me a question.

"Are you friends of my brother Dewey?"

Oh, so she really is Dewey's sister. She does kind of look like him too.

"Yes. We're friends and also work colleagues. Were you here when we all came here together earlier?"

"Mm-hmm. I was looking from inside the house."

"I see. You should've come out though. I bet Dewey would have loved to see you. He still hasn't come back by the way. Maybe I should go and tell him to come here," I suggested, but the girl shook her head.

"No... Ronnie's gonna get mad at us."

"Ronnie...is your brother, right? The one who was being beaten before. Why would he get mad at you?" I asked, surprised.

"He said that Dewey is different from us," she explained with a sad face, "so we can't meet him or talk to him anymore."

So not only did he tell Dewey not to come back, but he's telling his other siblings to avoid him as well.

"Forget about Ronnie for a second. What about you? Would you like to see Dewey?" I asked, trying my very best to sound gentle and reassuring.

"I-I want to see him. I want to talk to him. He's so kind and he knows so many interesting things. I love my brother!" she exclaimed, and as she did so, tears started welling up in her eyes.

I reached out my hand and patted her head. This girl was probably just doing as Ronnie had told her, and she couldn't talk to anybody about how she really felt. Maybe she opened up with me because I told her I was a friend of Dewey's.

The girl started sobbing, shaking as she did so, and I softly hugged her. She seemed surprised at first, but then she let herself go and rested her little body against mine as she kept wailing.

While I waited for the poor girl to calm down, I thought about Ronnie and Dewey. The former said that he didn't want anything to do with the latter, but looking at how he actually interacted with him gave a somewhat different impression.

"Thank you..." The girl seemed a little embarrassed once her tears had stopped.

"Don't worry." I patted her head once more. It was then that I noticed several pairs of envious eyes looking in my direction.

More of Dewey's siblings, all even younger than the girl I had just spoken to, had come out from hiding and were now staring at me.

"Do you all want me to pat your head?" I asked, and they all nodded.

"Dewey always did that for us, but Ronnie never does, so..." the girl shyly explained.

"Well, then it's *head pat bonanza time*!" I announced, stroking all of the children's hair in turn, until they were all smiling.

"Hey," I told the girl after I was done, "I guess I want to have a proper talk with Ronnie. Can you tell me where he works?"

"A...proper talk with him?"

"Yes. About Dewey."

"But he doesn't..." she started saying, leaving her sentence unfinished. *He doesn't like Dewey,* is what she probably wanted to say.

"I have to talk to him to be sure," I replied, trying to put some confidence into my voice.

You could never guess other people's feelings, no matter how close they were to you. The only way to know the truth was to ask them directly. The girl, persuaded, told me where her older brother worked. Leaving the children's fate in Larna's capable hands, I headed toward Ronnie's workplace.

Chapter 4: Divided Siblings

I, Dewey Percy, was raised by two people who made as many children as they could and then had them earn money so that they themselves would not need to work. Our house was decrepit, our clothes were worn-out, and our stomachs were constantly empty. My first memories are those of working from home as a child. Whenever I made a mistake, my parents would insult and beat me for how useless I was.

Some of my older brothers and sisters had run away without a word, probably fed up with that horrible home situation. Because of our parents, they had never learned how to read and write, and I wondered how they were faring on their own in this mostly literate country. However, I never heard anything from them.

However, Ronnie, one of my brothers, despite being five years older than me, never left home. He remained there, bravely withstanding the dreadfulness of it all so that he could take care of his siblings.

He always sounded grouchy, but he actually cared a lot for us, and he even took food out of his meals so that we could eat more. I looked up to him, and at the same time I wanted to be of some help myself.

Of course, I didn't want to grow up into someone like my parents, but neither did I want to turn out to be as helpless as my older siblings whose only option had been running away. I wanted to change this horrible situation, both for me and for all my other siblings.

In order to escape from poverty, I needed a good job, which in turn clearly required me to study a lot. I bartered with my siblings, promising that I would keep working just the same, and convinced them to let me go to school.

During the day, I would attend school, where my classmates would make fun of me for my raggedy clothes and old, battered textbook. During the night, I would stay up late to work and study even more, as much as I could.

My efforts paid off, and I was able to skip grades and quickly pass what people called the most difficult admission test in the kingdom, the one that allowed me to work at the Magical Ministry. When I received the news of having passed, I felt the most happiness I ever had in my whole life.

As I started working at the Ministry, I moved to the workers' dormitory located on the premises, but I didn't forget about my family. As soon as I received my first salary, I sent almost all of it home, addressed to Ronnie, hoping that it would make my siblings' life easier, and I continued doing so every month.

However, I eventually found out that Ronnie knew nothing of this money, which had all been intercepted by my father and used to finance his drinking. Or maybe part of it had gone into my mother's pocket—I do not know—but whatever the case, my siblings did not see a single cent of it.

I was so busy getting used to my new job that I never found the time to visit... Well, truth be told, I did have days off, but I never used them to go back home. At the Ministry I had a nice, clean room and tasty, warm meals. I didn't have to sleep on the cold floor bundled up in a bunch of rags, I didn't have to feel hunger, and most importantly, I didn't have to withstand my father's violence.

I liked my new life, and I didn't want to go back just to be beaten by that drunken old man. In the end, I wasn't any different from my other siblings who'd run away. I was just thinking of myself, doing what was best for me with no regard for how my brothers and sisters were doing. I had abandoned them.

It only made sense that Ronnie would tell me not to come back ever again. I had deserved that, and I had no right to feel sad for it.

It's all my fault, I thought, holding back the tears as well as I could, when I felt someone put a hand on my shoulder and heard them call my name. I didn't need to turn around to tell who it was. I knew her voice well—she was Maria, the girl I loved.

We had known each other since we were kids. Even though we lived in the same town, her situation was entirely different from mine—she was a magic user, and a Wielder of Light at that, which made her a rarity among commoners.

At first, I remember feeling envy for her. However, listening to some of the rumor-loving people in town, I later found out that her life had not been quite as rosy as I had assumed. Her neighbors shunned her because of her powers, and, once at the academy, she

was bullied by her noble classmates.

I will never forget how she looked as she told me that she, too, once believed that she would have to fight all alone. However, despite the sadness, despite the pain of it all, she kept showing her kind smile.

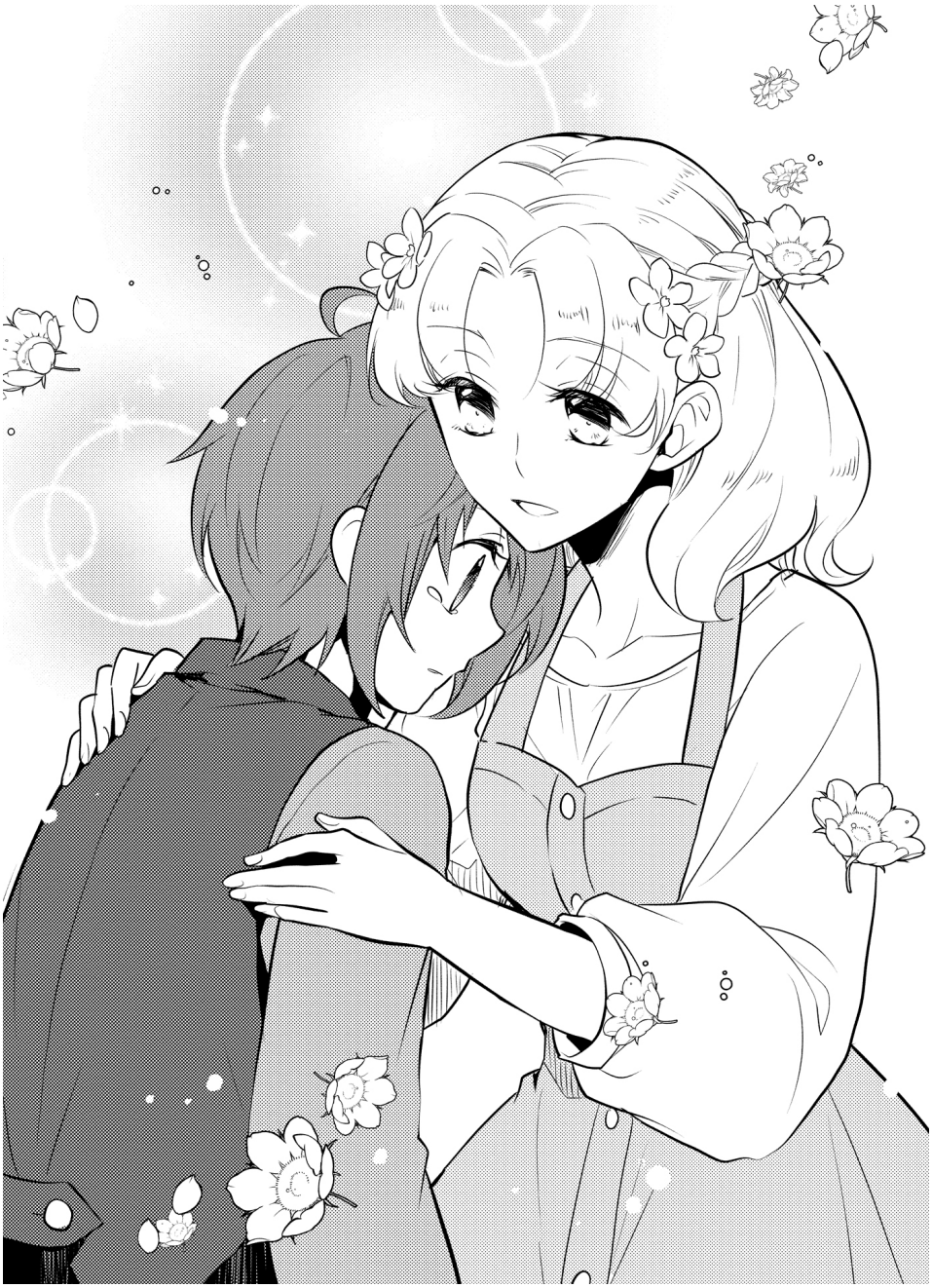
Even though the people there were anything but welcoming, she would still go back to her hometown on her days off. The strength that she showed was incredibly charming, but at the same time, it made me realize how I could never be like her. I had left the siblings I had wanted to help to their own fate, enjoying my new leisurely life.

"Is everything all right, Dewey?" she gently asked me.

I knew that she was lying. I knew that she had no reason to be there and only wanted to make sure I was okay...and I wanted to let myself go, accepting the pity that she was offering me. However, I wasn't worthy of her kindness.

"Yes," I claimed, holding back the tears, "I was only a bit shocked. I am sorry. But my brother isn't to blame for what he said. I did abandon them. I am sorry you all had to witness that scene." I couldn't raise my head, let alone look Maria straight in the eye. "As I said, I will take a public carriage, so please go back without m—"

As I spoke, she took me in her arms, and I found myself inside a warm embrace.



"*Dewey*. Didn't I tell you that you don't have to face everything by yourself? You can rely on me," she said, stroking my back. "If you feel like crying, you shouldn't hold back. It will make you feel a bit better," she continued, and as if on command, tears started flowing out of my eyes.

I was torn between the embarrassment of being seen crying and the warm comfort of the first gentle hug I could ever remember receiving.

After crying for a while, I did feel a bit better, just as Maria had assured me. The more I calmed down, however, the more the awkwardness set in. In particular, my face was pushing against something very soft, which could only be...

No, don't think of that. *I absolutely cannot think of* that.

But the more I tried to ignore that fact, the more I couldn't stop thinking about it.

"I-I'm fine now. Please let me go," I insisted, now at my limit, and I was relieved from her breast—I mean *embrace*.

I could only imagine how red my face was at that moment, but at least my heart felt a little lighter.

"You do seem fine now," Maria told me with a smile.

"Yes..."

The girl I love comforted me while I was crying... Should I be happy about this? Should I just be embarrassed?

"So, since you are fine now, I have a proposal to make. Would you like to hear it?" She stared at me with her clear blue eyes, making my face feel even hotter.

"O-Of course..."

"Won't you try to speak with your brother again?"

"What?!" I yelped, completely taken by surprise. I had assumed that Maria, in her kindness, would suggest keeping my distance from someone who clearly wanted nothing to do with me.

"B-But he told me to never come back, because I abandoned my family..."

"That is my point," she answered, gesturing with her index finger. "You didn't abandon them. You were sending them money, and today you rushed here as soon as you read that letter."

"I never came back here before today though..."

"It's barely been half a year since you left. You've just started

your new job, so I'm sure you've been busy catching up with work even on your days off."

"That's true, yes, but..." I knew that, had I really wished to do it, I could have found the time to go back home. I chose not to.

"And most of all, you don't even know why your brother told you those things."

"That's just because I left him and all my other siblings..."

"But you didn't! You can't be sure of how he feels, since you've never talked about it. You're just making assumptions. Someone," she said with a giggle, "once told me this: *you can't tell what people think, even if they're very close to you. Even if they're family. So you need to* talk *to them to be sure.*"

I could tell that she was trying to do an impression of Katarina, and I couldn't help but giggle as well.

However, she was right. Even when we lived together, Ronnie and I were both so busy that we never had much time to talk to each other. He was a grumpy guy, but he always looked out for his siblings—I didn't know why he'd say something like what he did.

I must not run away, I thought, but I couldn't work up the courage to step forward either.

"I'll come with you," Maria then declared, and I immediately started walking back to the house, with the world's most wonderful woman by my side.

★★★★★★

"Hmmm... I don't think I've made any wrong turns..."

I'd been following Dewey's sister's directions to Ronnie's workplace, but I didn't seem to be getting anywhere, and I started feeling anxious. There was a lot of greenery around me, but not a single soul that I could ask for information.

I wasn't *that* bad at following directions...but I didn't have a compass built into my head either. Furthermore, I didn't really know this town except for the area around Maria's house. I'd never been near Ronnie's workplace before, and it honestly surprised me to even find a path in what was basically a forest.

"I thought it'd be close by, since he went there on foot..."

And his legs were injured too... It's sad to think he had to walk on this bumpy path full of rocks.

I kept stumbling my way along the path until I saw Ronnie's

back in the distance.

So I didn't *get lost!*

He was walking relatively slowly, probably because of his hurt leg, so catching up with him wasn't so hard. "Ronnie!" I called when I was close enough.

"H-Huh? Why are you here?"

"I wanted to talk with you a bit more," I answered, and he looked at me suspiciously.

"Why should I talk with *you*? And I don't have time anyway. I'm going to work."

"But I heard from your sister that your job involves strenuous manual labor. How are you going to work, hurt like that?"

"Tsk, always running her mouth..." he grumbled, clearly displeased. "I know, but I have to go and see if there's something I can do. If I don't make money, all the little ones are going to starve."

"So you're not even sure you'll be working at all? Then it'd be better to rest for the day, or your injuries won't get any better. If you need to report that you'll be taking the day off, I can deliver the message for you."

"Were you even listening to me? I'm paid by the day, and I need to work. I can't just take a day off like that."

"But if you go and hurt yourself even more, you won't be able to work at all. If you need money now, just ask Dewey. He'd be happy to know he can help."

"Dewey left us. He's not one of us anymore," he replied dryly, furrowing his brow.

"He was very worried about all of you while coming here, you know?"

"That guy..." he muttered, and I caught a glimpse of sadness in his eyes.

"You really care a lot about your brother, don't you?" I asked Ronnie, whose face immediately turned sour.

"Huh?! What are you talking about?! I just said that he isn't one of us anymore!"

"So you said, but doesn't that just mean that you don't want him to worry about the rest of you and enjoy his own life?" I countered, feeling that this was the true meaning behind his harsh words.

"How'd you come up with that idea?!"

“By looking at you back there and here now. It’s obvious that he’s important to you,” I declared, confidently staring at him.

Ronnie started awkwardly scratching his head. “Did Dewey say that?”

“Nope. It’s just what I think. Dewey thought that you hated him, and he was quite shocked because of that,” I replied, and Ronnie gave me a look that was half relief and half sorrow.

“Let him think that then. Don’t tell him about what you just told me.”

“But why? He was really hurt when he heard those words coming from one of his beloved siblings. You should stop being so embarrassed about it and just tell him the truth.”

“I’m not embarrassed about anything!”

“You aren’t?”

Huh, I thought that was the issue. Ronnie does look like the type who has trouble admitting his own feelings.

“Of course not! I just don’t wanna weigh him down...”

“How so...?”

“You saw that scum we call ‘father.’ While we’re working our butts off, he steals all the money he can from us, gets drunk, and beats us. And our mother isn’t much better either. That’s why we have to live in that tiny shack that’s gonna fall apart any day now. I’ve never been to school, so I can’t hope to get any decent job, since I can’t read. And all the others who left before Dewey were the same. He was the only one who made it. He got into the Ministry... Having to care for a family like this is only gonna be a hassle for him.”

“That’s not...”

Before I could say *true*, Ronnie added one more thing.

“He’s our pride,” he said, looking calm and satisfied as he did so. “He’s always been smart, you know. He even learned how to read all on his own. When he told me he wanted to go to school, I knew that was the right thing for him. He’d go to school and then come back home to work. I know how hard he was working, trust me. And then, what do you know, he was even smarter than all the other kids there, and he got to skip grades. Oh, I was so happy when I heard of that. Then he got recommended by the school to take the Ministry’s exam, and he managed to pass it without a problem. I’m so proud... No, *we’re all* so proud of having him as our brother.”

Ronnie's recounting of his brother's achievements was a happy and loving one. He clearly wasn't lying about being proud of Dewey.

"That's why I don't wanna weigh him down. I want him to forget about scum like us and live his best life." He smiled sadly.

"Ronnie... Neither you nor your siblings are scum."

"I can't read and I can't do calculations with numbers. I'm a piece of useless scum, just like my father."

"Your father may be scum, but that doesn't apply to you. Of course, being literate and numerate is very useful, I will give you that, but those skills don't make you any worse or better of a person. If anything, I think very highly of you for the way you take care of your younger siblings."

Despite the beating he had received, he was still determined to go to work to feed his family. Despite how this could make Dewey hate him, he wanted his little brother to be happy and free. That was the opposite of scum.

Ronnie was staring at me, surprised. Perhaps, just like Raphael had theorized, both Dewey and Ronnie had been put down by *someone* for all their lives—their father, obviously—and ended up losing all of their self-confidence.

"I-I..." Ronnie finally started talking, but someone's jarringly brisk voice interrupted him.

"There she is!" the voice cried. I turned around and saw a cloaked woman running out of the woods toward us with a grin on her face. She was the very woman Liam and I had met near the orphanage. Larna had told me her name...

"Sarah?" I wondered, and she seemed surprised.

"How do you know that name?" she asked me.

"Someone told me, obviously. More importantly, what do you want?" I fired back, wary of her, and she started laughing.

"I've come to bully you a little bit."

"Huh?!" I uttered, confused by that nonsensical answer. "Why in the world would you do that? We barely even know each other, and this is the longest we've ever talked!"

"Yes," she agreed after thinking about it for a while, "that's true. But, you see, I've been feeling all weird up here because of you recently," she continued, placing a hand on her chest.

For the first time, her expression didn't look fake. Her face right now reminded me of a child who could start crying any moment

now. I felt kind of sorry for her, and I reached out my hand to her.

"And so, I'll bully you a bit to make up for it," she concluded, going back to her fake-looking grin as she raised and then quickly lowered her arms. When she did this, a huge black snake appeared out of nowhere.

Wow! That looks even more realistic than the snakes I make! I thought, failing to understand the gravity of the situation.

"Watch out!" Ronnie shouted, jumping in front of me to shield me from the snake, which hit him straight in the arm.

"Hng!" he cried out in pain.

"Are you okay?!" I asked, trying to determine if he had been hurt.

"It's nothing. But don't just stand there like an idiot! And what's that girl's deal?!" he shouted, but, from the way he was holding his arm and the pained expression on his face, I could tell that it had definitely not been *nothing*.

He jumped to protect me even though he barely knows me... He really is *a good guy!*

"I'm sorry. She's...an acquaintance...of sorts, but I guess she hates me for some reason. Anyway, show me your arm."

The spot where the snake had hit him had turned into a large black bruise.

"What's this now?!" he yelled, scared by the unnatural blotch on his skin.

This isn't a normal bruise. It was Dark Magic, just as I suspected... That girl really knows her way around nasty spells, that's for sure. It's just like that time when she sealed us into that pitch black space... I thought, the main difference being that, unlike the previous time, I had absolutely no idea what to do.

"Awww, I missed," Sarah muttered with a clearly fake frown. I feared that she was not going to leave it at that, however.

“Ronnie, that woman is dangerous. Please run away,” I requested, but he shook his head.

“I’m not gonna leave you alone with someone dangerous,” he replied. He wasn’t just a good guy, but a brave one too.

“Thank you, but don’t worry—I know how to defend myself. However, I can’t hold out for that long, so I want you to go and tell that woman from the Ministry who was with me earlier. Can you do that?”

“If you can defend yourself, then you’re probably better off without me...” he conceded, looking at his wounded body. “I’ll go get that woman.”

As he started running back toward his home, I mentally added “can make decisions and act quickly under stress” to the list of good things about Ronnie.

“And have her look at your arm!” I shouted as he escaped. He raised a hand to show that he’d understood.

Good. And now, let’s deal with her, I thought, turning around again to face Sarah.

“That’s the second time you let someone else run away. You’re really kind, aren’t you?” She spoke with a big smile and an unfittingly cold voice.

She kept faking emotions so consistently that I couldn’t tell what she was thinking at all. I had caught a glimpse of what seemed like a true reaction earlier, but it had only lasted a second.

“Say, why do you—”

“And that’s one more thing I hate about you,” she interrupted me, swinging her arm once again. This time a black fog appeared, surrounding me.

Everything around me went black and silent while the forest disappeared.

This must be the same spell as before, no doubt about it. She’s trying to trap me in the darkness. Last time it was so scary... I could have never made it out if Jeord and Keith hadn’t been with me. But this time, it’s different. I know *how to get out.*

I visualized my skull wand, something that I was now well used to doing. I immediately felt its weight in my hand, and I clenched my fingers around it. Then, I waved the wand and visualized the darkness disappearing. A small dot of light popped up in front of me

and started sucking up all the darkness surrounding it.

Perfect! I did it.

Soon I was out of the darkness and back into the forest, where Sarah was standing in front of me, looking terribly annoyed.

"So you really can fight my spell that easily... Well then, how about this?" she taunted me, raising her arm for the third time. I knew that when she swung it back down it would make yet another dark spell come forth.

Seeing how there wasn't that much distance between us, I rushed toward her and took her arm in my hand, stopping her from moving it. It was extremely thin—worryingly so.

"Listen. I want to talk this out with you," I pleaded.

"Wh-What are you saying?" she asked in disbelief. The shock on her face, for once, looked genuine, which made me feel some relief.

"You seem to hate me for some reason, but I don't hate you. I want to know more about you, and I want to understand you. That's why I'd like to talk," I explained, still holding her arm.

Her black eyes were as wide as those of a frightened child as she stared into mine.

"Look..." I tried to continue, but she shook my hand off, lowered her hood over her face, and rushed into the forest as if she was trying to run away from me.

She looks so...defenseless.

"In the end, we still didn't manage to talk..." I sighed to myself as Sarah disappeared between the trees.

★★★★★★★

I, the girl they called Sarah, was aimlessly running through the forest. I didn't know where I was going, but I felt like I couldn't stop. If I did, that weird feeling in my chest would have taken over me.

I'd always thought that Katarina Claes was a weird woman, but today I learned that she was even weirder than I'd ever imagined.

She wants to talk with me? Know me? Understand me? I've never heard such strange things. What is wrong with her?

The calm, peaceful way she'd looked at me when she said those things made them even worse. It was the first time that anyone had ever looked at me like that... Or was it?

Maybe, long ago, someone else had looked at me that way.

Before my father had stopped coming back home, my mother would give me that same calm look as she caressed my head. And when my father disappeared and my mother started ignoring me, that one boy would smile kindly at me.

And even before that, my father...

When I was taken by darkness, I had shut all those memories away to protect my heart. I lived without thinking, doing only what was ordered of me. Now, because of that cursed Claes woman, those memories had started resurfacing.

It had been a very long day...

"Mom, I'm ba—"

I opened the door to find unfamiliar men inside my house. Scared by that sight, I looked around for my mother, before finally seeing her lying down on the floor beyond the strange intruders. One glance was enough to understand that she had no life left in her.

I let out a scream that cannot be described with words, and I felt something explode inside of me. My whole body was taken over by a burst of heat.

"Hey, this kid's got magic! We're supposed to kill her too, but... What should we do?"

"Magic kids can come in handy. Let's take her back with us for now."

"And what about the body?"

"Orders are to just make sure she doesn't get found."

The men talked amongst themselves, but I couldn't really hear them. I kept screaming and hugging myself.

I feel so hot... Mom... Mom!

All of a sudden, I saw a dark shadow appear in front of me and felt a sharp pain in my stomach. The last things to go through my head as I lost consciousness were the kind mother I no longer had and the red-haired boy's kind face.

Why am I remembering these things all of a sudden?

Tears—something I thought I couldn't shed—were coming down from my eyes.

My heart was throbbing,

throbbing with pain,

sadness,

longing,

grief.

I ran even faster, overflowing with unfamiliar emotions. I kept plunging through the trees, scratching my face, hands, and feet against the branches, hoping that I would soon go back to normal.

★★★★★★★

I was staring at the forest into which the woman had disappeared before realizing that I had more important things to do. Ronnie was still wounded, and I had sent him to call for Larna. I needed to tell him as soon as possible that he didn't have to rush anymore, or he'd be putting a lot of undue stress on his already weakened body.

Even though I ran back as fast as I could, by the time I'd reached Ronnie I was almost back at his home. He noticed me and we just stood there for a while, staring at each other, gasping for air from all the running. That must have been a pretty funny sight.

"Hah... Hah... Th-Thank you...for going back all this way...running..." I gasped as soon as I had enough breath to do so.

"Huff... Huff... D-Don't worry... Haah... I wasn't even...going all in..." he replied, still wheezing.

He ran all this way just because I asked him to, and he jumped in front of me without a second thought to save me from that snake... He's such a good guy. Oh, right!

"Ronnie, show me your arm!" I commanded, and I took a closer look at it. The black bruise hadn't grown any bigger or darker, but it hadn't shrunk at all either.

"Does it hurt?" I asked.

"It's not that big of a deal, really," he answered nonchalantly, but as I touched his bruise, he clearly writhed in pain.

What kind of spell could this be?

"I'm sorry this happened to you because of me..."

"I was the one who decided to jump in front of that snake," he told me, but ultimately it had all been for my sake. And to think the poor guy had been injured enough by his father already.

I wondered whether Maria's Light Magic could fix his bruise—Light Magic could cure wounds, but unfortunately it had failed to work that one time that Keith had been...cursed or whatever.

Maybe I can just pull it off, like with that curse thing... I thought,

and I tried doing so, but to no avail. *Okay, that didn't work... What about absorbing it like I did with the black fog? Might as well try.*

I put one hand behind my back, so that Ronnie wouldn't see it, and I made my skull wand appear. With a flick of the wrist, I visualized the bruise being sucked away into nothingness, and...

"Wh-What's that? That black thing is, like, rising..." Ronnie exclaimed, surprised by how the bruise was leaving his body and disappearing behind my back. "What is going on?!"

I did it! I'm great!

"Can you tell me what is going on?!" he repeated his question, probably understanding that I'd used magic on him. I couldn't really explain what I'd done, though, since Dark Magic was involved.

I tried to come up with a good excuse...and failed. "It's, ummm, a trade secret. Can't talk about the details."

"Oh, right... You work at the Ministry too."

Thankfully he didn't know much about magic, and just assumed that this was a normal thing.

"So, does your arm still hurt?" I asked.

"The pain went away along with the bruise..." he replied, much to my relief. I still wanted Maria to take a look at him, but at least it seemed that the worst was behind us.

"I can't fix your other wounds though. We'll need someone else to take care of those," I explained, looking at all the other non-magical bruises he still had because of his father.

He shook his head. "Forget about those. They're my own fault."

"I can't just forget about it! You're all battered up, and I made you run on top of that. Also, it's *not your fault* that your father beat you up."

In hindsight, his father had probably been so hard on him because Ronnie had tried to take him away from Dewey. Whether or not that was the case, Ronnie certainly wasn't to blame for his father's violence.

He again declined. "It is though. Anyway, you should stop worrying about me and go home. Aren't your friends waiting for you?"

However, I had no intention of giving up this time. "No. I won't go home until I've seen your wounds treated and you and your brother having a proper discussion."

"What's your problem, girl?" He looked shocked. "I've already said I don't want him to have anything to do with us anymore."

“Because it’d weigh him down, right?”

“Right. He doesn’t need any of us ignorant, useless lot.”

“You can’t be so harsh with yourself. Forget about weighing him down. Dewey is proud of you, you know.”

“Because I look after the others? I’m just doing that because nobody else would.”

He really doesn’t want to admit it… Getting through to him isn’t going to be easy.

“It’s obvious how much you care about them…and you even took the risk to protect me, a stranger, before running for help despite how hurt you were.”

Normally you wouldn’t do that for someone you’d just met a few minutes earlier.

“That was just in the heat of the moment…”

“Even so, that’s not something that just anybody would do. You’re a great person! You’re kind and strong,” I declared, pumping my fists.

“She’s right!” a voice nearby called out. I looked in that direction and found Dewey, also pumping his fists, standing besides Maria.

Oh, Maria brought him back! Way to go!

“You’re always looking out for the rest of us! I know you work the hardest of all, and you don’t even use the money you make for yourself! You use it for our siblings, because you’re so kind!” Dewey told his brother.

“How long have you been listening?” wondered Ronnie, half-distressed and half-embarrassed.

“Since you said that you don’t want me to have anything to do with you anymore… I didn’t know you thought you’d weigh me down or anything like that.”

Ronnie covered his face with his hand and let out a big sigh. Dewey had heard the part that his brother most wanted to hide.

“There’s no point in hiding it since you’ve already heard it… It’s just as I said. You fought your way out of this misery. The rest of us would just drag you down, so—”

“That’s not true!” Dewey interrupted his brother. He was so passionate in saying those words that his face had turned red.

That was the first time I ever heard Dewey yell. Despite his young age, he was always calm and collected.

“Why would you drag me down? If it weren’t for you, I’d never

have been able to join the Ministry!"

Ronnie, slightly taken aback by his brother's outburst, replied, "I didn't do anything. You were the one who put in all the effort."

"No way you 'didn't do anything.' Back then, I was so intent on doing my best that I didn't even notice, but after I started working at the Ministry and I could catch my breath, I realized just how much you supported me," Dewey countered, approaching his brother and taking his hands. "You used to do part of my share of work, didn't you? How else would I be able to do a whole day's worth of work after coming back from school?"

Ronnie didn't answer, but the way he was blushing left little room for doubt.

"I respected you back then, and I respect you now. So don't say that you'd just drag me down!" Dewey shouted at his brother.

After standing in silence for a few moments, Ronnie finally replied. "I've always been so proud of you. We all have. You scored a job that good even though nobody ever handed you anything. That's why we wanted you to be free to enjoy the life you deserve."

Dewey started crying, but I suspected those probably weren't tears of sadness. "I started studying and putting in all that effort because I wanted a better life for myself, it's true. But the only reason I kept at it was because I wanted a better life for you and all our other siblings too!"

"Dewey..."

"So, don't run away from me like that! Let's *all* leave that terrible life behind us!"

It seemed that Dewey's words had finally reached Ronnie's heart.

"You're right." The older brother nodded.

Maria and I, deeply moved, were looking at them from the sidelines.

"They are such good brothers," she commented.

"Yes," I immediately agreed.

Now that Dewey and Ronnie had finally overcome their misunderstandings, we could all go back to their house. The two brothers apparently wanted to talk with all the rest of their siblings.

That makes sense... Even though they know they have each other's backs, they really have to do something about those parents. They're the cause of all the problems in that family. Even if all the kids got away with Dewey's help, that deadbeat dad of theirs could come after them.

Maria and I told Dewey to ask us for help if he needed anything, and he said that he would. It seemed that today's events had changed him for the better, teaching him that it was okay to rely on others.

When we reached his home, I was ready to fight their horrible father with all the strength I had in me, but I was met by a surprising scene.

"Umm...huh?"

Dewey's dad was nowhere to be seen. Instead, all of his siblings were cleaning up the house, helped by a bunch of people I'd never seen before. Since Larna was giving them orders left and right, they were probably her subordinates.

"Miss Larna...? What is happening?" a befuddled Dewey inquired.

"Oh, Dewey," she replied with a serious face, "I heard that your parents couldn't find a job, so I 'found' one for them. The employer will provide their accommodation, and they were to start immediately, so I sent them on their way. They'll be *busy* for a while, so if you want to contact them, just go through me."

That all sounded wonderful...except for how it was obviously a lie. Dewey's parents forced their children to work so that they didn't have to, so I was sure that Larna was to blame for their alleged sudden change of heart.

However, despite noticing how suspicious that story sounded, Dewey didn't seem in the least bit concerned—if anything, he looked relieved to find out that his parents had basically been kidnapped. That reaction told you everything you needed to know about what he thought of them, and all of his siblings also looked more relaxed than earlier.

"And...why are my siblings cleaning up?" Dewey asked.

"So they can leave," answered Larna casually.

"Leave...? They're leaving the house?!"

"Can't have them stay here on their own now that your parents are away 'working,' can we? I heard that one of your brothers is of age, but looking after this many children would be too much for him. I'm having them move to an apartment managed by the Ministry, where they'll be looked after as needed," she explained as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

Those children had been living here basically on their own for their whole lives, but Larna, who wasn't going to stand for that, had

immediately arranged for them to move. She really was a capable superior.

"But we don't have enough money to move..." Ronnie had gone pale with fear.

"Don't worry, your parents are going to pay for that with their new job. And the Ministry's lodgings aren't that expensive, so part of Dewey's salary will be more than enough. I'll even find you a real new job, if you want," Larna replied, leaving the young man shocked and almost unable to accept this much kindness.

However, when Dewey lowered his head and thanked Larna, his brother seemed convinced, and he did the same.

"Just leave it all to me," Larna assured them, sounding very pleased with herself.

And so, it was decided that all of Dewey's siblings would move to a proper house, and Ronnie would also get a new job. That was sure to make Dewey feel very relieved too.

After that discussion was over, I explained to Larna how we had run into Sarah and how she had hit Ronnie with a Dark Magic spell which I then removed.

"How did she even find you?! Does she follow your smell or something? Or is it magic? Hmm. This is very interesting..."

Larna had a point—last time could have been a coincidence, but today Sarah had clearly been looking for me.

Do I...smell that strong?

"From the way you say she ran away, she probably isn't going to come back all that soon. However, keep this. For safety." She handed me something that looked like a small egg with a piece of string coming out of it.

"If you're ever in trouble, pull on that string. The device will make a loud noise and another device which I have on me will notify me of it. Use that if Sarah comes at you again," she explained.

Oh, so it's just like the key chain alarms that kids used in my old world... She must have made this with magic.

"But, you know, I have to ask you," she continued, "you do have a familiar, right? Why don't you use that when you need help?"

"Oh, that's right! I'd forgotten about him! Again."

Pochi, my Dark Familiar, was a very good boy. He would always come to the rescue, as long as I remembered to call out to

him. Unfortunately, that almost never happened, since I tended to think of him as just a pet.

"I will try to remember next time..." I promised my superior, who was giving me the most dejected look ever.

"Please do... Even though I hope there will be no such next time," she replied with a deep nod.

I was actually supposed to report all those happenings with Sarah to the Ministry, but Larna, not wanting to keep me busy on my day off once again, offered to do it instead, based on what I'd told her.

"But isn't it a day off for you too?" I asked.

"Don't worry. It's basically a hobby for me," she replied.

Both she and Maria looked at Ronnie's arm, and they found nothing wrong with it. The latter even fixed the rest of his wounds with her Light Magic, and Ronnie was extremely impressed and just as grateful. Along with Dewey, he was now going to help the rest of their siblings prepare to move.

Maria and I wanted to help as well, but we were told that there were already more than enough people there—including those that Larna had called—and that we should just head back.

"It's still a bit early to go home though..." I observed, looking at the sun still high in the sky.

"In that case...would you like to stop by my house?" Maria shyly suggested.

"Of course! We've come all this way after all, and I bet you want to stop by too!" I agreed, and so our next stop was decided.

The two of us, accompanied by Pochi, whom Larna had told me to call out just in case, headed toward Maria's house, this time walking on a proper paved street. The trail that Ronnie and I had been running on earlier was little more than a footpath through the forest, cleared to allow some construction work nearby.

Poor Ronnie had to use that path to go to work every day... At least now Larna will introduce him to a proper job, and he won't have to worry about his other siblings as much. It's been a tough life for him, but I hope he'll be happy now.

While thinking about the future of the Percy family and discussing it with Maria, we kept walking until we had almost reached her house.

"It's been so long since I last met your mother. I should have brought a present or something."

“I failed to mention this to you, but...given the time of the day, my mother is unlikely to be at home. She will probably be at work,” Maria replied, looking troubled.

“Really? She won’t be there?”

“I think so. I am sorry I did not mention this to you earlier.”

“Oh, don’t worry. That’s not a problem. But then, why do you want to go home?” I had thought that the only reason she wanted to visit was to see her mom.

“I thought that maybe...my father might be there.”

“Your father...”

I suddenly realized that, in all the time we’d known each other, I’d barely ever heard Maria mention her father.

If he’s home at this time of the day, does that mean he works nights? But wait, then why wasn’t he home when I met Maria’s mom?

I had a few doubts, but Maria started speaking before I could voice any of them.

“Actually, I haven’t really spoken with my father since my magic powers first appeared...” she confessed.

I was utterly surprised. She and her mother seemed to be on such good terms that I’d assumed the same was true for her and her father as well.

“Wasn’t that...a real long time ago?”

“Yes. I was five years old at the time.”

That’s pretty much her whole life! She’s been living with this issue for more than a decade?!

“Since both my parents are commoners, having a baby who could use magic made them the subject of a lot of unpleasant talk,” she sadly explained.

For the first time ever, I properly understood the circumstances around Maria’s childhood.

As a noble, having magic powers was a normal, good thing. Those around me praised me just for being born like that. However, that didn’t apply to commoners, who usually had no magic. My brother Keith, for example, was born from an escapade between a nobleman and a commoner woman...and most people probably assumed that this was the case for Maria too.

When I first visited this town, I noticed that everyone knew where Maria’s house was. I thought that it was just a really close-knit neighborhood, but maybe the truth wasn’t that pleasant. Maybe Maria’s family was just treated like an object of gossip, given

that a magical baby being born in a town this small was a very rare occurrence.

"And then my father stopped coming home..." she continued, sadly lowering her face before quickly raising it again, this time with her eyes full of resolve. "But seeing what happened with Dewey made up my mind. I must do something about this. I told Dewey that he has to speak with his family to properly understand the situation, but I lacked the courage to do so myself. However, I will not run away from the truth anymore. I want to try to speak with my father."

Maria was a special person—not only could she use Light Magic, but she effectively was the main character of this entire world. At the same time, she was just a girl the same age as me with all her troubles and fears. However, she was ready to face her weaknesses and move forward. This is what truly made her special.

"I can't do anything for you, but I'll be by your side," I told her, taking her hands into mine.

"Thank you." She smiled. "When you are by my side, I feel like I could do anything."

We kept walking, hand in hand, all the way to her house.

Chapter 5: Father and Daughter, Divided

I, Maria Campbell, was walking toward my own home with newfound courage, courage given to me by the loving warmth of the hand that was holding my own.

When my magic powers had appeared, my mother had started leaving the house less and less. It was Lady Katarina's visit during the academy's summer vacation that had convinced her to break out from her hermitage. Thanks to her, on that day, I was able to have a proper conversation with my mother. This helped us mend our relationship, and now our bond was as strong as it ever was.

As things between us improved, my mother even started working at a bakery. She only did so a few days per week initially, but she gradually increased them and was now working almost every day.

One day, coming back home from her job, she had told me with a smile how fun and fulfilling it was for her. Moreover, she was able to make friends in the workplace, and on her days off she would even go out into town with them.

My mother had changed a lot in the span of a couple years, but my father had still not come back. He would occasionally send money to help us with our expenses, but he never showed up in person. I had thought that my father hated me. I was sure that he did not want to see me. But the letter I recently received from my mother made me think that maybe this was not the case.

Truth be told, I had already had my suspicions before that. Now that my mother had started working, neither she nor I were subject to as many nasty rumors as before. At first, they would blame her for giving birth to a magic-wielding child, saying that she had been unfaithful to my father. Now, instead, many people had come to sympathize with us, blaming the man who would get drunk and then cause trouble at the tavern or pass out on the streets—my father.

He used to hate liquor. Why had he started drinking so much? Was it because of the rumors? Or was it something else...?

So far, I had never tried to find a definite answer to those questions. However, recently, I had received a letter from my mother in which she told me about how a friend of hers had seen my father. He had apparently come home while my mother was away to leave some money there. As he did so, he had a newspaper cutting in his hands. The article he had cut was the one mentioning my enrollment at the Ministry.

Did my father not hate me? Did he actually care about me? I could not help but wonder. At the same time, I feared that, if I asked him, he would tell me that he did indeed hate me. This thought had kept me from facing the truth for so long...but I did not want to cower any longer. I had found the courage I needed, thanks to seeing Dewey and his brother clear up their misunderstandings and to the things that Lady Katarina had told me.

Today was the same day of the month as the one on which my father had been seen delivering the money to our house. He had probably done so during his lunch break from work, which was probably around this time of day.

I could not be certain that he would come. Maybe last time he had just happened to pass by. Of course, I could just go to his workplace and be sure to find him, but I had never been there and definitely lacked the courage to go.

If he does come...

Once I reached home, I saw him there. It was as if fate had chosen this day for me to talk to him. I called out to him from a distance.

"Dad."

He turned around, and I saw that he looked much older than I remembered. After all, it had been more than a decade since I had last seen him.

"Maria..." was all that he said. He then stared at me with his mouth open in surprise. He probably wasn't expecting to see me there.

"What are you doing?" I asked him, and his face twitched as he struggled to come up with an answer.

"I was just passing by. See you then," he replied, already trying to leave.

I cannot let him go. I barely talked to him.

Without thinking about it, I strengthened my grip around Lady Katarina's hand, and she did the same in return. I looked at her, and she nodded at me as if to say, "You can do it."

I can. If she is with me, I can do anything.

"Wait, dad!"

He stopped, and I walked toward him by myself. I was no longer holding my friend's hand, but the courage she had given me was still with me, and I needed it to look my father straight in the eye.

"I thought you never came back home because you did not want to see me," I told him, and he seemed surprised to hear this.

"O-Of course not..." he stuttered.

My fear that he really did hate me disappeared, and relief took its place.

"I heard that the people in town have started blaming you instead of me and mom. Are you doing this on purpose? Are you pretending to get drunk and pass out on the streets to deflect the gossips' attention from the two of us?" I asked him.

I had been considering that possibility since I had first heard about the situation from my mother. My father was never a drinker, and in fact, a sip of liquor was enough to make him fall asleep. I could not imagine him drunkenly causing trouble at the tavern. Furthermore, despite this supposedly debauched lifestyle of his, he was still managing to deliver us money every month. None of it made any sense.

As my mother started working again, I was able to find out more about what was actually happening, and I immediately suspected that things were not as they appeared. I believed that my father was just putting on an act so that the ill rumors would focus on him instead of mom and me.

Hearing my question, he first looked surprised, and then somewhat dejected. Looking at his face confirmed my suspicions, and I took his hand.

"Dad, you don't need to do that anymore. Mom and I both have friends that trust and understand us now."

My mother's new friends knew what kind of person she was, and they found the rumors about her alleged affair with a nobleman ridiculous and infuriating. She had told me that now she finally felt understood, unlike back when some people had started avoiding her when those rumors began circulating.

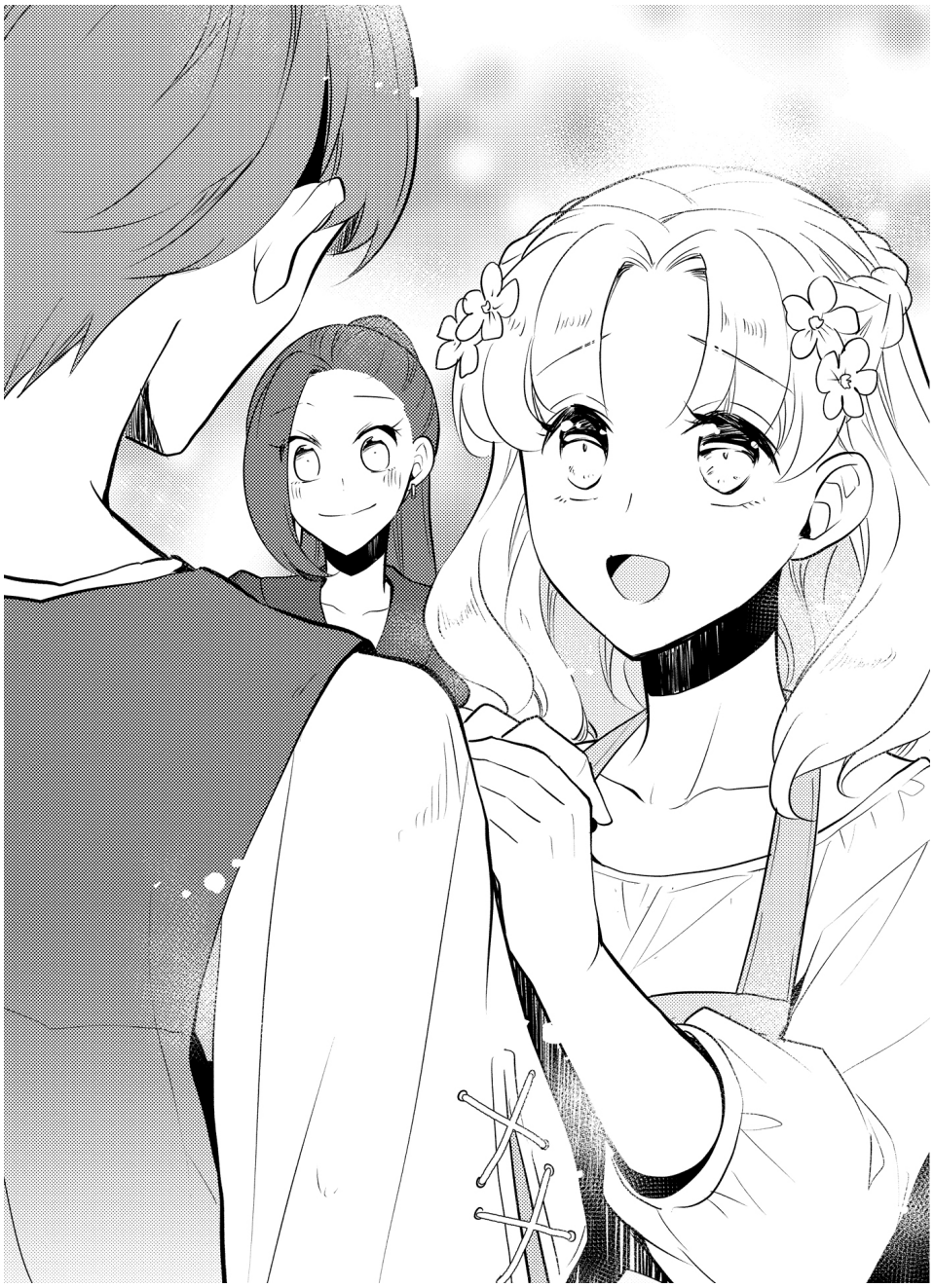
I, too, had many wonderful friends—including, first and foremost, Lady Katarina. I glanced at her, and so did my father. She greeted him with a nod, and he did the same. I could tell just how relieved he felt. Before attending the Academy of Magic, I had always been alone. I was happy to finally be able to introduce a friend of mine to my father.

"And we are both stronger now," I proudly told him.

My mother and I no longer feared rumors. No matter what people said, we were ready to go on with our lives.

"So, please...come back home, dad," I pleaded, firmly gripping his hand.

He stared at me silently for a moment. "I will," he answered as he gripped mine with his big, strong hands.



I saw the tears welling up in his eyes, and I felt like crying as well.

He told me that he had to go back to work for today, and I had to go back to my room at the Ministry as well, but we promised to meet the next time I had a day off.

Lady Katarina, who had been listening the whole time, was crying harder than either of us.

"Dat's so sweed! I'b so glad!" she blubbered, sharing all of my happiness.

"Thank you so much. I would not have been able to do this if it were not for you," I told her, and she sprang forward to hug me. Her embrace felt incredibly warm and undeniably kind.

★★★★★★★

"*Sniff... Sniff...*"

"Are you all right?"

"Yes, thank you. I feel much better now," I answered, blowing my nose in my handkerchief.

I had just learned about Maria's family situation, and seeing the love that she and her father shared for each other had moved me so much that I'd started crying harder than either of them. I cried so much I even made Maria worry about me.

Her father had to leave for work, but, before doing that, he commented that, "I see that you've made some good friends."

If that was his way of describing the weird wailing girl grasping at his daughter, I figured that he was a really kind and understanding man. Had it been my mother, she would have scolded me for having my face covered in tears and snot in public. After calming down, I followed Maria inside her house, where she made me a cup of hot tea.

Thank you so much, Maria...

While I was sipping my tea, my friend was writing a letter to her mother, telling her what had just happened. Maria said that she wouldn't be able to tell her in person, since she always came home very late.

"She seems to be enjoying her work so much that she keeps at it until the evening," she explained, sounding very happy as she did

so. I hoped that she would soon start sounding like that when talking about her dad too.

"You know, it's hard to believe with all that's happened, but it's still early in the afternoon. I wonder if we should just go home," I pondered.

Our original plan was to go shopping in the castle town, but what I actually did was go to Dewey's house, get attacked by Sarah in the forest, check back in on the Percy children, and meet Maria's dad. I felt kind of exhausted already, and, come to think of it, I hadn't even had lunch. My brain informed my stomach of this sudden realization, receiving a loud growl in response. I actually had made plans about what restaurant to go to, and I was looking forward to stuffing myself with desserts.

Cakes, cookies, ice cream, and... Ugh, just thinking about those made me even hungrier.

"Actually, you know what? Why don't we go and have a few sweets before heading back home?" I suggested, and Maria, giggling at the sound that my stomach was making, quickly agreed.

"Okay, here we are."

Our inconspicuous carriage had safely brought us to the fanciest part of the capital, the one closest to the castle.

Actually, before setting out for the capital, I was so hungry that I couldn't resist and bought some bread from a bakery close to Maria's house. It was so good that, if it had been closer to my house, I would have probably become a regular. However, since I also wanted to enjoy the sweets from downtown, I made sure not to make myself full with just that. It wasn't easy, but I restricted myself to just a few kinds of bread.

"Now, Maria, let's decide which shop we should go to first!"

"Yes! Oh, now that I think of it... Do you still want to buy that tea I talked to you about?" Maria asked, reminding me of the tea that allegedly relieved drowsiness, which was actually the whole reason I'd decided to go shopping in the first place.

"Right! Buying that was the whole point. Let's go buy that before focusing on the sweets then."

Maria guided me to the store where she had found the tea in question, and right outside, we saw a familiar face.

"Here you are, finally. I thought you wouldn't come at all, or that maybe I'd missed you," Alan brazenly greeted us as he sent off

a white bird that had been perched on his hand.

"What?! Why are you here? And what's with that bird?"

"I heard that you would be shopping downtown, but since you weren't coming, I found one of the shops you'd be likely to go to and remained on the lookout near it. The bird is to signal that I've found you," he replied.

"Oh, I see... No, wait, I don't! First of all, how did you know I'd be coming into town?"

"Well, that's not so important. Anyway, everyone's dying to see you," he said, and, just as he did that, I saw yet another familiar face running in my direction. It was Mary, who jumped at me and quickly hugged me.

"Lady Katarina! I'm so glad I was able to see you. I couldn't come here before lunch, so I was worried we wouldn't be able to meet at all!"

It's been a while since I've last met her, but I'm glad to see she hasn't changed one bit.

She kept saying, "Lady Katarina! Lady Katarina!" embracing me with her sensually curvaceous body, until someone dragged me out of her arms from behind.

"I ask that you refrain from hugging my fiancée in public, Lady Mary. And you, Alan, do something about your own fiancée instead of just staring."

"Prince Jeord?!" I exclaimed, surprised that Mary and Alan weren't the only ones there.

"We are here too," Sophia chimed in, popping up out of nowhere with Nicol behind her. She looked as cute as always, and her brother's smile was as potent as I'd come to expect.

Ugh, his attractiveness is out in full force today, I thought, trying to catch my breath as I barely resisted his charm.

"Except for a certain somebody who is so obsessed as to have come here first thing in the morning, bringing his work with him, we actually all gathered not long ago," Keith, also appearing out of nowhere, smirked. He looked kind of sweaty, which just made him even sexier than usual.

"Has nobody ever introduced you to the concept of efficiency in one's work, Keith? As your future brother-in-law, I would be happy to teach you."

"I politely decline the offer in consideration of how I have no plans of becoming your brother-in-law."

While Jeord and Keith went at it as they usually did, Sophia came closer to me and explained what was going on.

"We all wanted to meet you, even for just a little while, so we did our best to finish our work early."

I thought they all had a day off... I'm flattered they'd do something like that for me.

"Well, why don't we all go and have sweets together?" I suggested, and everyone quickly agreed. As for the tea, my friends had already bought it for me beforehand. I gratefully accepted it and looked forward to drinking it before the start of my next afternoon shift.

We all walked into a pastry shop, and I couldn't help but feel that our group—despite everyone's best attempts to dress down to the level of townsfolk—was extremely conspicuous. All my handsome and beautiful friends were getting quite a lot of stares.

"Wow... They all look so delicious..."

"Hehehe. We should order several and then share them between us, Lady Katarina."

"That's a wonderful idea, Mary! Let's do that!"

"Do not forget about us!"

"Of course. We can share them between the four of us!"

Since there were so many of us, we had to split: the boys at one table and the girls at another.

"I came here specifically to be with Katarina. Why do I have to sit here with three other men?"

"I'm afraid there is no other option now. Please have some of this cake, Your Highness."

"Oh, this is pretty good."

"You have cream on your face, Prince Alan. Here, take my kerchief."

"Thanks, Keith."

"As I've said before, I think that you would really make a great mother, Keith."

"As I've said before, I'm a man, Nicol."

Judging from what I could hear, the boys were having fun at their table too.

As I took a brief pause from eating, Mary asked me a question.

"Incidentally, Lady Katarina, where have you been up until now?"

I realized that, in my excitement at seeing my friends after so

long, I'd forgotten to tell them about all that had happened during the morning. I gave a very cursory explanation of how we'd run into Dewey and gone to his home, I'd been attacked with Dark Magic, Dewey had made up with his brother, and Maria had made up with her dad.

Mary held her head in her hands. "I'm sorry, but that recounting raised more questions than it answered... May I ask you for some more details, Maria?"

W-Was I that *bad at telling the story?!*

Maria, after giving both me and Mary a slightly concerned look, masterfully retold all that had happened. The boys also came next to our table to listen.

Once Maria was done with the story, my friends took turns at expressing their dismay.

"Katarina, you really cannot help yourself, can you?"

"Big Sister, what am I going to do with you?"

"Lady Katarina..."

"There you go again..."

"Lady Katarina..."

"Katarina..."

I thought I did great today! Why are they mad at me?!

And so, several appalled remarks later, my day off was over.

★★★★★★★

I, Susanna Randall, known as Larna Smith, had just finished reporting to the Ministry and helping out the family of my subordinate Dewey Percy with moving to a new home.

I made my way to the quarters of Jeffrey Stuart, my fiancé and main supporter and collaborator.

I knocked on the door, and he told me to come in with his usual nonchalant tone.

"It's me," I called out as I entered, finding him behind his desk face to face with stacks of papers. Contrary to what one may think due to his casual attitude and apparent lack of motivation, he was a fast and effective worker.

There were many people who thought he was the most fit candidate to succeed the king, but he had no interest in taking the crown.

"I finished my report on the matter I told you about earlier," I explained, handing the document to him.

"Hmmm," he commented once he had quickly skimmed through it, "this seems to be more or less what you told me earlier. Still, I feel for Lady Katarina. She is involved in the worst kind of incidents with such regularity that you would think she is cursed."

"Quite so. Not that she seems to notice, or care."

Katarina remained happy and fearless despite the tremendous number of misfortunes she was subjected to, including, for example, the recent Dark Magic run-in near the orphanage. I could not help but worry about her, and I imagined that her many loving friends were at least as worried.

"For the time being, I gave her a magic tool to call me for help. I also instructed her to rely on her Dark Familiar, but whether she will follow that depends on her," I continued, referring to the beast that lived in her shadow. It could transform into a giant wolf, making for a very powerful ally. Unfortunately, she had come to see this creature of darkness as a cute little pet, therefore forgetting about its usefulness in battle. It was a terrible waste, albeit unsurprising considering her personality.

"We should look into having someone keep watch over her

from the *metaphorical* shadows then. However, it would be better to consult with Duke Claes first, as he may have already hired someone to do just that," Jeffrey replied, handing me back the report. "I must say... It seems you weren't as coolheaded as usual this time," he added. A trace of concern appeared on his face.

"Yes, I'm fully aware of that." I knew very well that using magic on a civilian was not something to be done lightly. However, when I had Dewey's father in front of me, I could not help myself. "The way that man treated his children as tools got under my skin."

Only two things were able to elicit emotional responses from me: the mysteries of magic, and parents who used and abused their children. The latter was probably because of my own upbringing.

My father, Marquis Randall, was a man who was exclusively interested in his social advancement. Wives and children were but tools meant to turn a profit and aid the achievement of his own goals. Love was not part of the equation.

He had chosen my late mother as his wife because of her high social status, or so I had heard, and as soon as illness overtook her weak body, she was relegated to a guest house, where she passed away without ever seeing her husband again.

As a child, my remarkable intelligence allowed me to fulfill my father's wishes, to the point that I was eventually chosen as the prince's fiancée. However, once my mother died, I realized that I no longer wanted to live as a puppet in the marquis's hands, and I started defying his orders. This led to him hating me so profoundly that he wanted to have me *disposed of*, something which he could not easily do because of my engagement to Jeffrey.

Even now, in his constant quest to be rid of me, the marquis kept suggesting to the prince that he marry one of the other Randall daughters instead. Having been raised by such a man, I had no tolerance for parents who behaved in similar ways, and it took active restraint on my part not to kill them on the spot.

"I cannot blame you for that," Jeffrey, who was privy to my situation, replied with a shrug.

"Right after that, it didn't take much digging to uncover just how terrible those 'parents' were," I explained.

Dewey's mother was just as despicable, giving birth to child after child, leaving them in the care of their older siblings and enjoying her life without a single worry. While her husband's means of entertainment seemed to be gambling and drinking, her main

pastime was one enjoyed while laying down in a bed—I was not sure how many of those children actually belonged to the man they called father.

"The children lived for each other, devoting themselves to helping their siblings," I continued, thinking back at Ronnie's attempt to protect his younger brothers and sisters. "Unlike me."

I had a few half-siblings born of a different mother, but I barely knew anything about them. All I could infer about them was that they were treated even worse than me, since being born of a concubine surely made them less valuable in the eyes of our father.

Owing in no small part to Jeffrey's collaboration, I had considerably expanded my power in the past few years, but I was yet to reach the point where I could openly oppose the marquis. As such, I felt I could do nothing to help my siblings.

"I can't do anything," I muttered, looking down at my hands.

The sound of my younger half sister crying how she wanted to live by her own means echoed in my memory. I felt sorrow, something I was not used to. At that moment, Jeffrey gently pulled my head toward him and against his chest.

"Maybe *now* you can't, but you just need to become more powerful. Isn't that what we're working so hard for?" he said gently, hugging me.

The warmth and smell of his large chest healed my dejected heart.

"You're right. Thank you," I answered, and he started caressing my hair. I stood still, enjoying his embrace a while longer.

★★★★★★★

"Welcome back, Sarah."

When I returned, still disgruntled because of Katarina Claes, my master greeted me. I replied with a bow, but I couldn't help but keep my eyes on the man standing next to him.

"It's been a while, huh?" the second man remarked with a smile, noticing my glance. "Now you even go outside by yourself? That's unusual. I'd like to hear what brought about this change."

I looked away from him. I *hated* the way he looked at me from the darkness, as if I was an animal on which he was ready to experiment.

"There has been no change, and I have nothing to tell you," I

replied tersely.

"Don't worry, it won't take that long."

He ignored my absolute rejection, and then my master intervened.

"I would like to hear *your* report first," he said to the man. "And you, Sarah, may leave. It is your day off after all."

Relieved, I quickly left the room. I knew that I should have reported about finding Katarina, but I was too exhausted to do so. I lay down on my bed, curled up, and soon fell asleep.

★★★★★★★

After my very eventful day off, it was time to go back to work. When I got out of my carriage and walked past the Magical Ministry's gates, I noticed Dewey and Sora walking together. It was normal for newcomers to come to work early, but I'd never seen just the two of them together like that, so I curiously approached them.

"Good morning, Sora, Dewey."

"Morning," Sora answered with his normal curtness.

"Good morning," Dewey replied with a huge smile. I was happy to see him smiling after all he'd been through the previous day. "Thank you so much for yesterday," he then told me, lowering his head.

"Not at all. I didn't do anything," I demurred, but he shook his head.

"The things that happened only did so because of your help. My siblings and I are all grateful."

Being thanked so openly had got me blushing, and Sora, noticing that, was silently sneering at me.

"It's rare for the two of you to walk to work together," I observed, trying to change the topic.

"Sora helped me with moving yesterday, and today I went to his room to thank him, so we decided to come to work together," Dewey explained.

"You moved already?"

Dewey had already told me that he would eventually move in with the rest of his brothers and sisters, who now lived in a proper apartment, but I hadn't expected for him to leave the Ministry dorm so soon.

“Not yet. I was just preparing. Sora noticed me having trouble packing all of my things by myself, and he offered to help.”

“I mean, I could tell you weren’t used to that kind of thing. It’s not like I did anything huge. You’re really polite though, going out of your way to thank me for something like that,” Sora commented.

“Oh, I owed you as much.”

Sora, even though he could sound harsh at times, was actually a very kind guy, and Dewey seemed to have quickly taken a liking to him.

“So you’ll move in with the rest of your family soon. Have you seen their new place already?” I asked Dewey.

“Yes. It’s a clean, nice house, and all the neighbors are also from the Ministry, which makes it extremely safe. I cannot thank Miss Larna enough,” he replied enthusiastically.

That’s a huge step up from that shack they were living in… I’m so glad for them.

“Good morning, everyone!” a cute voice greeted us from behind.

“Oh, Maria! Good morning,” I responded, and Dewey and Sora quickly followed.

She was always as beautiful as you’d expect from a game’s protagonist, but today she looked particularly radiant, possibly because of how things had gone with her dad on the previous day.

“I’m glad to be able to see all of you so early in the morning.” Her smile was so adorable that if I were a man I’d already have been on a knee asking for her to marry me.

Dewey’s red face hinted that he was probably thinking the same thing. As for Sora, I couldn’t really tell. He looked the same as usual, but that didn’t prove anything since he was so good at hiding what he really felt.

While I looked at my two male friends, I noticed that Sora gave Dewey a slight slap on the shoulder.

Hm? What was that for?

“M-Maria, thank you so much for yesterday,” Dewey started speaking. “My siblings and I are all grateful.”

He said the exact same words to me, but this time it feels…different. His eyes look twice as wide…and kind of moist too. That’s not really like him at all…

He then went on to say something that he definitely had not said to me.

“I-I would like to take you out to eat as a way to thank you when you have the time.”

What’s this?! He’s asking her out?! Who are you and what did you do with Dewey?!

Sora, noticing how I was staring at Dewey with my mouth agape, whispered something into my ear: “I also taught him how to ask older girls out yesterday.”

“How dare you taint pure, sweet, innocent Dewey like that!” I whispered back.

“I just gave him some advice. He told me he’s got a crush on an older girl.”

“But he’d never act like that on his own!”

“I know, so I told him that looking all cute and defenseless works wonders with older girls. He’s got that sweet face, but he didn’t know how to use it right.”

That’s like a straight punch to a girl’s maternal instinct... Maybe Sora is a bad influence on him... Now I wonder if it’ll work on Maria though. She looks surprised...

“Yes! I would love to.”

She said yes?! They’re going on a date?! Maria’s going on a date ALL ALONE WITH A BOY?!

I was happy to see Maria finally get involved in romance, but at the same time I couldn’t shake away a certain kind of loneliness.

“Then we shall decide the date,” she continued with a smile. “When are you free, Lady Katarina?”

It took me a moment to process those words. “Huh?”

“Oh, did you not hear that? Dewey offered to take us out to eat. When would you be available?”

“I, um... I’ll have to check my schedule. Do you mind if I get back to you later?”

“Of course. We could discuss it further during lunchtime,” she replied.

I couldn’t find the courage to tell her that the “you” in Dewey’s “take *you* out to eat” was a *singular* “you.” The poor misunderstood boy was visibly saddened, while Sora was laughing with pretty much no restraint or respect.

I’m sorry, Dewey...

We all kept walking together, and, when we reached their department, we split up from Maria and Dewey, promising to meet again at lunchtime. Dewey still looked quite sad.

“That girl can be pretty thick too, huh...” Sora chuckled to himself.

Wait... Too? Who else is supposed to be thick?

Left with that mystery, I decided to warn Sora not to give Dewey any more questionable advice.

The weather’s really good today. All right. Let’s get on with work!

Afterword

Hello, everyone, Satoru Yamaguchi here. I can barely believe that we've reached the eleventh volume of *My Next Life as a Villainess*. Of course, this is all thanks to you, the readers.

I think that, by the time this volume is released in Japan, the second season of the anime will have reached its second half. I am really grateful to the staff behind the anime for creating yet another wonderful season. To be honest, I never imagined it would even get a second season to begin with! Once more, this is thanks to the great support shown by fans. Thank you so much!

The first season of the anime covered the events of the first two volumes of the novel, which means that a lot of characters don't show up before the second season. I'm so happy to see them move and speak! Every week, I'm terribly excited for the new episode to air, and I hope you can enjoy the anime just as much.

Now, let's talk about what goes on in this volume.

First of all, there's the summons from the king. Katarina, whose main concern was deciphering the Dark Covenant, is shaking with fear, wondering what mistake of hers could warrant being called to the castle. She'll be going there with Maria, who was summoned as well.

Later on, Dewey receives a letter from his family telling him that his little sister is ill, and that he must come back immediately. Katarina, Maria, and Larna, who just happened to be there as he read the letter, join him as he goes back to his hometown... They're all in for a bunch of surprises.

That's the main gist of the story for this volume!

This volume, in Japan, should be released around August—a dangerously hot month. Be careful of heatstroke!

August, by the way, is when summer vacation ends for Japanese students. I remember when I was in grade school and I'd wait until the last three or so days of summer vacation to start doing my homework. On the last night, I'd have to stay up until almost morning to finish everything in time. As a result, I was

always kind of comatose on the first day of school. My parents scolding me for that wasn't enough to keep me from repeating the same mistake the following year.

Try not to get yourself in a situation like that, okay? And if you already are, I wish you good luck. Mom and dad used to tell me that I needed to become more responsible to be an adult, but I still managed to become an adult anyway, so obviously you have nothing to worry about.

Finally, I want to thank Nami Hidaka for the beautiful illustrations, as well as the editors and all the other people without whom this book could not have been made.

Thank you from the bottom of my heart.

Satoru Yamaguchi

Bonus Short Story

Ronnie

All of a sudden, my dad stopped beating me.

I—Ronnie Percy—looked up and saw a beautiful woman giving me a worried look. My dad, for some reason, was lying down on the ground next to our house. The woman told me that he'd stumbled and tripped over himself. That was no surprise, since the old man was always drunk out of his mind, but it was a relief for sure. Still, I was bleeding from my mouth. I must have cut the inside of my cheek while he was hitting me.

"Are you okay? Here, use this."

She offered me a handkerchief. I could tell she was trying to be polite, but I refused since I didn't want to get it dirty, using my sleeve instead. I then realized it was about time I headed to work.

"Well-off people like you shouldn't hang around in a place like this. Also, please tell Dewey to stop sending that money," I told the woman. She didn't have to get involved in our troubles.

I warned the little ones to stay away from the old man for a while and left. I was so beaten up that I wasn't sure I could get any actual work done, but I had no choice. I kept dragging myself along.

All of a sudden, I heard a voice call me from behind.

"Ronnie!" It was the woman from earlier.

"H-huh? Why are you here?" I asked, surprised.

"I wanted to talk with you a bit more," she replied like it was the most normal thing in the world.

"Why should I talk with *you*? And I don't have time anyway. I'm going to work."

I thought I'd made myself clear, but she insisted.

"But I heard from your sister that your job involves doing strenuous manual labor. How are you going to work, hurt like that?"

"Tch, always running her mouth... I know, but I have to go and see if there's at least something I can do. If I don't make money, all

the little ones are going to starve."

"So you're not even sure you'll be working at all? Then it'd be better to rest for the day, or else your injuries won't get any better. If you need to report that you'll be taking the day off, I can deliver the message for you."

She just wouldn't listen to me. In the end, I had to tell her the truth about my brother that I'd been trying to hide for so long. *I don't wanna weigh him down. I want him to forget about scum like us and live his best life.*

I'd never met a woman as weird as this one before. It figures that you'd only find weird folks at the Magical Ministry. And then, she said something even weirder.

"Of course, being literate and numerate is very useful, I will give you that. But those skills don't make you any worse or better of a person. If anything, I think very highly of you for the way you take care of your younger siblings."

Now *that* was something I'd never heard before. All my life, I'd been called scum, I'd been called useless. I didn't know what I was supposed to say...and then, all of a sudden, another weird woman, this one wearing a black cloak, jumped on us out of nowhere and attacked us. I moved in front of the Ministry woman to try and protect her. I tried to run to call for help, but I was too slow...and the weird Ministry lady ended up solving the problem herself.

For some reason, she kept thanking me, even though I hadn't done anything. She praised me so much that I started feeling fuzzy in my chest.

Talking with her, I realized that Dewey didn't hate me. He looked up to me and wanted to help all of us find a better life for ourselves. After hearing that, I decided that I wouldn't avoid him anymore. We were in this together. On the way home, I kept thinking of how to deal with those two deadbeat parents of mine, but once I got there—wouldn't you know it—they'd already been dealt with.

In the span of this one day, our lives had changed a lot—for the better.

There I was, preparing to leave the house, still confused about all of this, when one of my sisters walked up to me. Turns out she'd taken a liking to that weird woman from the Magical Ministry, and she said that she should marry into our family. Thinking of that honestly made my heart flutter a bit, but Dewey opposed her

suggestion like that'd be the end of him.

"What? What's the problem with her?" I asked him.

"She is a duke's daughter. She is engaged to a prince!" he replied.

That came out of nowhere. Dukes and princes, for me, had always been the stuff of fairy tales.

"Why's a noble like *that* coming to a place like *this?!"*

"She is just...*unique* like that. You might even say she's *too* kind," Dewey replied, trying to stifle a chuckle. I could tell that he didn't think ill of her. I saw the trust he had in his eyes.

Those weird feelings I'd started to get for that woman cooled down pretty quickly. Good thing I learned that she was out of my league early enough.

But still, if I'm going to move closer to the Ministry, maybe I'll be able to see her more often, even if just from afar... That'd be nice.

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My Next Life as a Villainess: All Routes Lead to Doom! Volume 11
by Satoru Yamaguchi

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